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GIRLS

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TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN
BY OLGA SHARTSE

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Tossia Meets the Girls

The trip she had to make to her new place of work took ages!

At first Tossia travelled by train for days and days. Desolate autumn fields spread fanwise beyond the window; thinned out russet woods flashed past, and strange towns with tall smokestacks appeared and remained in view for a long time. Villages and hamlets came hurrying out to the railway line to flaunt their charms before her for a brief moment, streak across the window, and tumble out of sight. This was Tossja's first long journey, and, overwhelmed by so many new impressions, she fancied that the whole of her native land was ranged there before her on parade while she flew past in her bouncing all-metal carriage reviewing the troops.

Next, shivering in her flimsy coat, Tossia spent some chilly days on the deck of a river boat. The paddles diligently shovelled the heavy September water. They met a tug hauling a mile-long raft that had enough logs in it to build a whole town with hundreds of cottages, schools, hospitals, a club and a cinema. . . . "Make it two cinemas," Tossia big-heartedly granted the inhabitants of that imaginary town where she herself might have to live one day. There were floodland meadows along the bank, and then again a wilderness of forest crowding to the very edge of the water. A herd of black-and-white broad-beamed cows, that seemed to come off a poster showing progress in dairy farming, were languidly drinking from the river. Raftsmen were clearing the banks of logs that had dried up during the summer, going over their queer equipment in the inlets, and generally making ready for the coming winter.

The final stage of the trip was by lorry, jolting along a rutted road. Tossia was going deeper and deeper into the heart of a virgin forest. Climbing on top of a case of macaroni, she looked around for lurking bears with the excitement of a young hunter. A small drum of cooking oil, rolling idly there and back across

the lorry floor, seemed intent on sneaking up to Tossia's legs and smearing her stockings. She watched her only decent pair like a hawk, and kicked the drum away before it got anywhere near her. She only relaxed her vigilance once during the whole endless trip to stare at some huge pines uprooted by a storm, and the nasty drum grabbed its chance at once, rolled up to her defenceless legs and. . . .

And here she was at last, in the lumber town where she was to live and work. Tossia trotted behind the long-legged caretaker who was leading the way to the hostel, striding proudly down the street with bedsheets and blankets under his arm. The man had a dashing air and wore a mixture of service clothes: cavalry breeches, navy jacket and flyer's cap.

Barely able to keep up with him, Tossia yet tried not to miss a thing about the town, twisting her head this way and that. The forest had once grown thick and wild here, but as people began to build up the town they very rashly chopped down all the trees, which is always the way. All that remained were the rotting tree stumps of an enormous breadth, and here and there beside them some frail and utterly hopeless saplings, protected by stakes, which the local schoolchildren had planted during the last verdurising and beautifying campaign.

The stern chief of the lumber camp, with whom Tossia had just talked, the caretaker, who was stalking ahead of her, and the few lumberjacks she saw in the street—all of them, as though by pre-arrangement, made believe they did not know or suspect that this was the back of beyond. And they did it rather well too. Watching them you'd think their lumber town was located right in the centre of the country, easy for newly employed staff to reach, and was anything but lost in the forest wilds close to the Arctic Circle.

"Talk about play-acting!" Tossia marvelled, rubbing her side which she had knocked against something in that jolting lorry on one of the bumps.

A circular saw was wailing and screaming, drowning out all other sound. It seemed to be in pain and lamenting its fate in that anguished wail, complaining against people who had

harnessed it with a driving belt and were forcing it to free the sleepers hiding inside the logs from the useless timber squashing them. People called their brutal doings work, and threatened the saw with a thing called PLAN. Tossia paused for a moment to sympathise with its plight, and almost had to run to catch up with the caretaker.

At a bend in the river, people were unloading a trainful of logs brought from the forest by the jolly little "cuckoo" engine. Never in her life had Tossia seen so many logs. They were stacked along the bank in towering houses without windows or doors. The logs would lie there resting until next spring when they would be pushed into the water and sent off on their long and hazardous journey to the rafting points, transshipping bases, saw-mills, distant construction sites, and into the greedy maws of paper factories.

"You chop a lot of trees down here!" Tossia said deferentially, catching up with the caretaker.

"We're trying to do our bit," the man said modestly, and then condescended to explain. "The whole lumber camp works for the lower depot."

"Oh, then you have an upper depot too?" Tossia asked, feeling rather proud of her quickness.

"We have that too. . . . Where d'you come from?"

"Voronezh."

"What, all the way from there?"

They had reached the girls' hostel. The caretaker jerked a thumb in the direction of a secluded earthen bank running along the side of the building, facing a waste plot of ground.

"That bank there is called Kamchatka," he said with disapproval. "Couples sit spooning there at night. After a while they start clamouring for a room for themselves. And we have no vacant rooms, just bear that in mind."

"I'm not interested in such things," Tossia said primly, stealing a look at the fateful earthen bank.

"That's what they all say at first," said the worldly-wise caretaker, and started up the porch steps.

They walked down the length of a gloomy corridor. The caretaker flung open a door.

"This is where you'll live," he said.

Tossia wiped her feet on the door-mat before entering her new home. The room was not too small, but then it wasn't too big either. Five beds were ranged along the timber walls; four were made, but the fifth was stripped down to its scraggy, striped mattress. The caretaker casually threw the bedsheets and blankets on the bed from where he stood.

"You brought a pillow with you, didn't you?" he asked Tossia hopefully. "We've any number of bedside tables, you can have a couple if you like, but pillows now, it's a regular calamity. . . ."

"What am I to do then, use a bedside table for a pillow?" Tossia demanded aggressively, confident that she had a perfect right to a pillow, and determined to make the man shell out everything she was entitled to.

He looked Tossia up and down, taking in everything from her cheap, threadbare kerchief to her badly worn shoes, little girl size.

"You mean, that's all you've got?" he asked, nodding at Tossia's small bag.

"It's all," Tossia admitted guiltily.

"New staff, indeed!"

Her pride injured, Tossia bit her lip and thrust out her childish, pointed chin.

"I'm not the clothes-happy sort!"

"Listen, my girl, you can't be completely happy without them either," the caretaker said with more friendliness. "Make yourself at home, I'll get hold of a pillow for you."

He went away. Tossia sat down on her bed and tried to bounce up and down on the springs as she always liked to do. But she got no bounce at all. Wondering what was wrong, she lifted the mattress and found no springs—just some boards resting on rusty iron rods.

"Try and be happy on this," she mumbled.

She quickly made her bed, doing it with the pleasure of a travel-weary person who has at long last reached home. Though

little more than a child, she had long been used to managing for herself and quickly making herself at home wherever fate brought her.

Taking her time, she examined her new abode with great thoroughness. She moved from one bed to the next with the alert look of a courageous explorer plunging into the depths of a strange continent, and tried to divine the characters of her future room-mates from their belongings.

The appointments were pretty crude. Besides the five beds and bedside tables, there was a big table in the middle of the room, an assortment of chairs and stools, an ancient wardrobe with a creaking door, and a tin wash-stand. Oh yes, there was also a loudspeaker and a clock with a large bolt tied to the weights for balance. And that was all the caretaker had supplied his charges with.

All the beds were covered with identical dirty-brown blankets, and all the bedside tables were painted the same drab but practical shade—such was the will of the caretaker. And yet, for all this drab monotony, each bed had an identity of its own. The habits and tastes of the girls who lived here rose against the featureless, barrack-like order which the caretaker tried to establish; some of the girls had obviously won the battle, while others had been overruled by the man and submitted to his army taste.

There was a soldierly austerity in the first bed and everything round it. No personal touch had been added to relieve the monotony. The only personal things were the bottle of cooking oil and the tin of salt standing on the bedside table, which told the world that their owner cooked her meals at home.

The second bed might well have rivalled the first in its indifference to comfort. The thing that leapt to the eye at once was the untidy mountain of reading matter heaped high on the bedside table: manuals, textbooks and plump, dog-eared novels. There were a few new books too, judging by their covers, but most of the novels were old, with yellowed and much-thumbed pages, some of them with neither beginning nor end. Apparently their owner liked reading in bed: it sagged so badly in the middle that it looked more like a hammock.

The third bed clearly said that its owner was a housewifely sort, fond of embroidery. The drab blanket was camouflaged with a lace bedspread, and there was a mountain of large, soft pillows with a small one on top. A richly embroidered linen towel was draped on the head rail, and an applique work runner was nailed to the wall behind the bed. On the floor lay the only rug in the room, a crocheted rug made from strips of brightly coloured cloth. A hemstitched doily made the ugly bedside table look almost pretty.

The owner of the fourth bed was something of a housewife too, but she did not seem to have her neighbour's patience and diligence. There was only a small spread for the pillows, and the embroidery on the towel was less ambitious. But then, standing on the bedside table was the biggest mirror in the room, and clustered round it were numerous bottles of scent, jars of face cream, powder boxes, combs, brushes, and all the other paraphernalia of a woman whose looks matter a great deal to her.

Tossia wasted no time on the books, but she did take a good long look at herself in the big mirror, and sniffed all the bottles and jars. She was thus engaged when the military-minded caretaker came back noiselessly into the room.

"Catch!" he called out, throwing a pillow to Tossia. "Work starts at seven. The canteen opens at six. So long!"

He waved vaguely and strode out, slamming the door.

Tossia discovered some dry firewood in the corner, and quickly lighted the stove to make herself some tea. She was filling the kettle with water from a pail when the door opened a chink, and an elderly man with a kindly, wrinkled face edged into the room. He carried a shopping bag bristling with long macaroni.

"How d'you do," Tossia said hesitantly, wondering what that man could be doing in a girls' hostel.

He nodded to Tossia without a word as to an old friend, walked to the soldierly bed and proceeded to take things out of the bag and put them neatly into the bedside table. Tossia kept watching the strange old chap out of the corner of her eye.

He took a parcel out of his capacious pocket, carefully unwrapped it and produced a dark cotton runner with some white swans painted crudely on it in oil—one of those notorious atrocities that are peddled to people innocent of good taste at the markets in spite of the manful though hopeless struggle our newspapers have been waging against them for years. From another pocket he produced some nails and a spanner, and fixed the runner to the wall above the bed.

"All right?" he asked Tossia.

"Yes, just right."

He dived into his enormous pocket again, took out a letter and placed it on the bed that sagged like a hammock. Before he left he took a last admiring look at the swans.

"It's a surprise," he told Tossia, and then slipped out of the room and gently closed the door after him.

Tossia opened her bag, found her dented tin mug, the remains of a stale bun and an almost whole chocolate of which she had only taken a small bite. She popped the sweet into her mouth at once, and with redoubled energy dived into her bag again in search of something to eat, but there was nothing. She abandoned the search and with a resolute air began to examine the contents of the girls' bedside tables. She liked much of what she found and soon she had a regular spread of all sorts of delicious eats on the table.

The kettle came to a boil. With a generous hand Tossia tossed some tea she had found into it, proudly inspected the table and settled down to enjoy her meal. She put a huge piece of sugar into her tea, sliced off a good chunk of fresh bread, spread it very thickly with butter and jam, and was just about to bite into the wonderful sandwich when her room-mates burst into the room: Vera, Katya, Anfissa, and a moment later, Nadya with an armful of firewood. They all crowded together in the doorway, startled by the sight of a strange girl so calmly devouring their food stores.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Katya, a big, attractive girl, whose beauty was not so much in her face as in her strong, supple body that not even the baggy padded jacket could disguise.

"Having tea," Tossia replied and took a sip of tea to show those stupid girls what she meant.

"I mean, where've you come from?"

Tossia choked over her tea and, coughing, made a vague gesture in the direction in which she believed lay Voronezh. Katya did not get it, obviously.

"Where, did you say?" she asked.

Reluctantly and angrily Tossia pointed to her bed with the delicious sandwich she had not even bitten into yet.

"You're just the room-mate I've been dreaming of all my life!" Anfissa said scathingly.

She was a telephone operator, the best-dressed girl in the room. She was so strikingly beautiful that everyone turned to look at her the instant she appeared, the men ogling her and the women stabbing her with envious glances. There was something predatory, something feline in Anfissa. She had been made aware of her beauty at too tender an age, and this awareness had given her an indestructible sense of superiority over all the other girls in the world. Anfissa had no special friend among her room-mates, and the only one she respected in her peculiar way was Nadya, because often she could not understand her.

Anfissa took a menacing step forward and pushed her pot of jam out of Tossia's reach.

"Where did you learn to pinch things?"

"But there wasn't anyone here to ask," Tossia said, not feeling the least bit guilty. "I had no sugar left, you see. That's the way we lived in the children's home, sharing everything. . . ."

"Oh, you're one of those!" Anfissa said contemptuously. "It shows."

Tossia jumped to her feet, ready to defend the honour of her children's home in battle, but Vera—the oldest of the girls—held her back, and pushed the package of biscuits she recognised as her own closer to the newcomer.

"Drink your tea before it gets cold," she said.

Tossia obediently gulped her tea, bit into her jam sandwich at long last, and with her mouth full turned to stare gratefully at the good and kind Vera.

Vera was the senior in the room, she worked at the upper depot as a marker, and was, besides, a correspondence course student of a forestry college. She had been married too, and so Katya and Nadya, but never Anfissa, made a habit of going to her for advice. Vera's authority was unquestionable, and even Anfissa preferred not to quarrel with her.

"So you were in a children's home before coming here?" Vera asked, and in her voice Tossia detected a note of pity. She hated it when people pitied her for a poor, little orphan.

"No, I worked for a whole season at a state farm," she answered brusquely. "But then I criticised the agronomist a bit and got . . . what d'you call it . . . a request to resign. I say, girls, is it true that your forest simply teems with bears?" she asked, brightening up.

"We want none of your bear stories," Anfissa shut her up.

"But why are you so mad at me?" Tossia looked at all the girls in turn. "Oh, you don't share things, that's why!" She suddenly understood, and shook her head sorrowfully. Imagine finding yourself in such a private-property-minded community! "Let's do it this way: whatever's mine is yours, and the other way about. . . ."

"More of the other way about from what I can see," sneered Anfissa.

She put away her pot of jam, and while she was at it, pulled her suitcase from under her bed to see if it was safely locked. Stung by the implication, Tossia leapt to her feet and banged her mug on the table, spilling the tea.

"Why, girls, are you crazy?"

She grabbed her bag and shook out everything there was in it onto the table. There was a towel rolled into a sausage, a brand-new plastic soap dish, a toothbrush, some plain undies, a single mitten which belonged to her left, less active, hand, a piece of thick looking glass, a large cheap brooch, some unmatched buttons, and a batch of her favourite movie stars' photographs, tied with a ribbon.

"It's all yours to use!"

"What riches!" Anfissa sniggered.

"Isn't she a scream!" Katya shrieked with laughter, holding her sides.

"Stop it, you two," Vera said sternly.

Nadya, a tall sullen girl, took no part in the conversation and no notice of Tossia whatsoever.

"Has Xan Xanich been?" she asked in a low voice, only now noticing the swans above her bed.

"Some nice old man did come in," Tossia replied.

Katya hissed at her and nudged her in the ribs, hitting the same unlucky rib Tossia had knocked against the side of the lorry coming here. Wincing, Tossia rubbed the poor little bone, hurt so cruelly for no good reason.

"What's the old chappie to her?" she hissed back in a loud whisper.

"She's going to marry him," Katya said very softly.

"Marry an old fogey like *him*?"

Nadya frowned, and Katya promptly clamped her hand over Tossia's mouth. Vera, too, looked her displeasure at the newcomer who had in her ignorance violated some unwritten law of theirs.

"Mind what you say," Vera said, and went to her corner.

Nadya was building up the fire in the stove.

"Why did you use up all the kindling?" she turned to Tossia with a harsh rebuke. "The firewood's behind the house, the end stack is ours."

"But how was I to know?" Tossia murmured, strangely reluctant to give a rude and snappy reply to this stern girl who was so unlucky in love.

Nadya saw her squirm, and left her alone, accepting her excuse. She began to cook supper for herself and Xan Xanich. Her large, strong hands did their job with the skill of long practice, while her face remained impassive as if she saw nothing about her and was preoccupied with one gloomy thought that preyed on her mind all the time.

Girls as big and strong as Nadya are always gladly taken on by the most demanding of bosses, and as gladly welcomed by workers

into their team. All her friends, men and women alike, thought her plain. The fellows Nadya could have fallen in love with always spoke well of her, borrowed fivers from her just before payday, treated her with great respect, even confided in her, but married other girls.

At 27, Nadya had already become resigned to her fate, and brooded on her secret thoughts in sullen silence.

Choosing an old man like Xan Xanich to marry seemed to show she was prepared to part with any hopes she may have had. And yet, one sensed a stubborn, latent strength in her, as if there was a spring inside her that was coiling tighter and harder only to recoil and shoot up one day to the surprise of all and Nadya herself.

Vera took off her long strapped bag, and as she reached up to hang it on a nail she noticed the letter Xan Xanich had placed on her bed. A shadow of annoyance slid across her face, her expression became forbidding and tense as if she had encountered an old enemy. With no more than a glance at the envelope, she picked it up squeamishly, strode to the stove and threw it into the fire. In her amazement, Tossia choked over her tea again, and stared aghast at all the girls in turn, but not one of them so much as twitched a muscle as if burning letters without reading them first was the natural thing to do.

"From your husband again?" Nadya asked.

Vera nodded.

"What a nice handwriting he's got!" Katya remarked, looking at the burning envelope.

"Yes, his writing is all right," Vera agreed grudgingly, and moved away from the stove.

Horried, Tossia watched the letter writhing in the flames. It seemed to be in anguish because no one had read it.

"And I've never received a single letter in my life yet, not even a postcard," Tossia said.

"Never mind that," Vera cut her short. "Have they fixed you for work?"

"Oh yes," Tossia said with eager pride. "They've put me under Churkin. I'm to be the cook."

Katya screamed with laughter at this announcement.

"You, a cook? Just look at her!"

"Some cook!" Anfissa joined in. "She'll starve our boys! Do you know how hard lumberjacks are to please?"

"Stop picking on the child," Vera snapped at the two girls who were really going too far, and then turned sympathetically to Tossia. "What a rotten thing to do! None of the local people wants to be cook, and so they appoint you!"

Tossia looked really frightened.

"Do they eat such a lot? Are they finicky?"

"You try working in the forest, then you'll know. . . . Have you ever done any cooking?" Katya wanted to know.

"I've had to. . . . I'm quick to learn generally," Tossia said trustingly. "My scientists had no complaints."

"What scientists?" Katya was amazed.

"She's making it up," Anfissa said.

There was something about this new girl that irritated Anfissa terribly, and she was dying to show her up for what she really was.

"Why should I?" Tossia said in genuine surprise. "When they kicked me out from the state farm, I wrote a letter to the newspaper about it. While they were checking to see if what I'd written was true, I decided to take on a job with some teachers to keep house for them. He was an assistant professor, and she was a what d'you call it . . . a post-graduate student, so you see they were real scientists. If you want to know, we had a professor come to tea! A very learned man, they say, but I didn't think much of him. . . ."

Anfissa turned her back on Tossia, annoyed that the girl had got away with it again. As for Katya, she suddenly moved up her chair closer to her and gazed at this one-time servant with avid curiosity.

Katya was a local girl, born in a nearby village, and she had never travelled farther from home than the district centre, but nonetheless she had seen all sorts of people in the twenty-odd years of her life besides the lumberjacks, collective farmers and tractor drivers familiar to her from the cradle. At different times

and under different circumstances she had seen. electricians, saw grinders, carpenters, fitters, livestock experts, agronomists, stokers, book-keepers, engine drivers, typists, mechanics, engineers, foresters, forest guards, topographers, surveyors, geologists, radio-operators, raftsmen, the Secretary of the District Party Committee and the Chairman of the District Executive Committee, Komsomol secretaries, trade-union officials, journalists, photographers, documentary film cameramen who descended on them suddenly last year to shoot their best team at work, teachers, doctors, nurses, one dentist, one drill operator, forest pest-destruction specialists, one diver, cinema operators, actors, actresses, one reciter of poetry, two midgets, a visiting fakir who swallowed swords, an official in charge of mushroom and berry gathering, an inspector of weights and scales, numerous bad-tempered representatives who came to the lumber camp to "whittle down" the local bosses, a judge and a public prosecutor, one of the directors of the timber trust, a manicurist, a real ladies' hairdresser, lecturers on political and scientific subjects, flyers of the forest air fleet, and even the Chairman of the Economic Council himself—and yet never had she seen a servant!

"Well?" Katya asked, looking with due respect at someone who had once actually belonged to that rare and somewhat mysterious profession.

"Well what?"

"How did you like the work . . . and everything?" Katya amplified the question with a vague, circular motion of her hand.

"I stood it for three weeks, and then I signed up to come here."

"Just think of it!" Katya gasped, pushed her chair bang against Tossia's stool, and asked in a compassionate whisper: "Exploited you, did they?"

"The idea! I'd never have let them!"

Katya blinked rapidly in dismay.

"Oh, they grudged you your food then?" She was glad to have guessed right at last.

"Heavens, no! They were the right sort. Why, staying with them was like living under communism! In the morning I'd take

their little girl to kindergarten, then I'd fly to the market and back, and after that I'd sit doing nothing on the balcony. While dinner was cooking, I'd clean the flat, two rooms they had and kitchen. . . . Pity their vacuum cleaner broke down and I didn't have a chance to try it," Tossia said regretfully. "And then every evening I'd watch television. It's like the cinema, only it's in a wooden box. . . ."

Katya blinked rapidly again. She took the whole thing as a personal insult and went into a huff. What did she know compared with Tossia? The glory of the weights and scales inspector, and even of the two midgets suddenly dimmed for her. She had seen a picture of a TV set in a magazine once, but she had not an inkling of what a vacuum cleaner was. She felt acutely envious of Tossia for tasting so many joys in her short life and coming so close to trying that mysterious thing called vacuum cleaner.

"Why did you leave then?" Katya asked in real annoyance, moving her chair away.

How could she make Katya understand just why she had left? Tossia sat thinking it over for some minutes. The scientists had paid her a good wage, trusted her and never counted the change, had her eat with them, serving her first as if she were their guest, and if that were not enough the wife had promised Tossia her practically new flared skirt, that was only slightly out of fashion.

"Look, she's swallowed her tongue! Come on," Katya said impatiently. "Were they so mean that you'd rather not talk about it?"

"Oh no, why," Tossia began, but then she fell silent again.

The assistant professor and his post-graduate wife had both tried so hard to make Tossia feel there was no difference between them and her, that soon the truth dawned on her: in their heart of hearts they did admit there was a difference, while pretending for the sake of politeness that she was as good as they were. At first the point missed Tossia, but after a while she grasped it: everything hinged on the fact that she was their servant. There was something in the job that belittled her in the eyes of others and made them look down at her.

And then, without waiting for the overcautious newspaper to put all the facts together and call the agronomist to answer, and shocking her employers with her downright ingratitude, Tossia signed up to help the forest industry, and started on her long journey to the cold north, abandoning the pleasant balcony she had come to love, the magic polished box crammed full of concerts, plays and old films, the broken but no less intriguing vacuum cleaner, and the promised flared skirt that was practically new and only very slightly outmoded. . . .

"Speak up!" Katya exploded, all her patience used up.

Thinking that the new girl was simply holding out on them, she swung a heavy fist to prod Tossia in her ribs again. Tossia ducked, and to appease her pugnacious interrogator began a long-winded explanation, a thing she had never tried before.

"You see, I had all sorts of trouble at the state farm, but still, I was doing a real job. But with those two now. . . . Fetch this, carry that. . . . Not heavy work, you'd think, but it weighed on me. . . . It stung, understand?"

Tossia fell silent, aware of the inadequacy of her explanations.

"Is that all?" Katya was sorely disappointed. She had expected Tossia to pull the scientists to pieces and strip their wonderful life of all its glamour. "It's no bed of roses here either. You'll be sorry you left that cushy job! With room and board and everything. . . ."

Tossia waved the suggestion away with fine disdain.

"You may be a big hulk of a girl, but you don't understand a thing. I won't mind doing any sort of work here, because it's for everyone. But there. . . . Nothing doing! Let them be their own servants!"

"That's right," Vera supported the idea. "They're the private sector."

"What did you say they were?" Tossia did not understand.

"Your human dignity was being humiliated there," Vera said in the tone of a mentor to make the not very well-read girl understand exactly what she had experienced as a servant.

Tossia shook her head thoughtfully. She did not want to argue with Vera who had rescued her from Anfissa's spiteful attacks; it was also flattering to know that such clever-sounding things had happened to her, but all the same she was too honest to let her simple experience be described in those bookish terms which Vera in all kindness was offering her.

"It didn't suit me, that's all," Tossia said, summing up her short career as a servant. "I say, girls, do you have the Northern Lights here?"

"You wait and see," Vera said.

Tossia finished her tea, scooped up the unmelted sugar from the bottom of the mug, and closed her eyes, almost purring with pleasure.

"All right then, you'll room with us," Vera said. "We'll see about that cook business. Maybe we can find some other work for you. What's your full name? We haven't really met yet."

Vera held out her hand, Tossia shook it, and told her room-mates she was Tossia Kislitsina.

Katya wiped her hand on her dress before shaking Tossia's.

Nadya came up too. She shook Tossia's hand strongly, like a man.

"Are they your only shoes?" she asked, looking down at Tossia's shabby old shoes. "It's pretty cold here in the mornings."

She got a pair of large, worn top-boots from under her bed and threw them at Tossia's feet.

"Try them on."

Tossia dived into the boots with an eagerness that betrayed a child's unspent love of dressing up. Kicking her legs high, she marched up and down the room.

"Puss in Boots!" Katya squealed with delight.

"They'll do until you get a new pair," Vera said solemnly, hiding a smile.

Tossia started towards Anfissa, her hand outstretched, but the older girl was too busy examining her face in her big mirror to be polite.

"My name's Anfissa. Charmed," she said ungraciously.

"You are beautiful, you know," Tossia said simply, taking a

good look at Anfissa and completely forgetting her catty remarks of a few minutes ago. "Lucky you. . . . You look like one of these movie stars." Tossia looked through her precious photographs. "It's gone. . . ."

"You shouldn't stuff your head with such rubbish," Vera told her sharply, apparently displeased with Tossia for admiring Anfissa's looks. "You're going to study in night school, you know."

"Me—study?" Tossia cried, appalled. "Why, I. . . . Why, do you have a night school here? Fancy coming all this way to end up in night school!"

Enter Ilya

To give the lumberjacks something nice to remember that long northern winter, the departing September made a final effort, and presented them with a really beautiful day, mild and warm, filled with the gentle wistfulness of waning autumn.

Tossia was busy in the crude kitchen shed on the edge of the clearing. The forest, beginning not ten paces away from the shed, seemed to be watching her vigilantly, for lack of anything else to do, to see whether her dinner would be ready in time or not. Tossia couldn't stand anyone watching her like this, and was furious with the stupid lumberjacks for chopping down trees where they bothered no one and missing this thicket right under their noses. Were they blind or what?

The pines and firs, self-conscious in their dull-green shabby everyday wear, clustered together, while the rare leaf-bearing trees among them gladly flaunted their finery which they were not to wear much longer. The birches were lovely in their gleaming silks and satins. The sad aspens were alluringly conspicuous for their wealth of copper. A solitary maple, autumn's own darling, blazed in the sun like a huge torch.

The clearing where Tossia had her kitchen shed was as sunny as her native Voronezh steppe, but the forest was dark, eerie and frightening. The sunrays tried and failed to pierce the tangle

of branches. One ray alone, finding a narrow slit, did stab the darkness of the thicket, and breaking up against the wall of trees, it picked out a dry, bony twig, shone on a crooked little pine, and then dwindled helplessly away at the foot of a sombre, moss-grown old fir.

Tossia was sure there must be a bear's lair there. At least if she were a local bear she'd certainly settle down with her little woolly cubs under that fir and none other, but then of course the bear would know best.

From the forest came the inspired symphony of work sounds: the intimate whispering and chirring of the saws, the crashing of felled trees, the rumbling of tractors, and the jolly banging of the axes. As she fed more wood into the fire, chopped the cabbage with a huge knife that made her think of pirates, and tasted the soup for salt, Tossia kept glancing towards the forest where the strange and rather awesome lumberjacks were working up enormous appetites.

Everything in this kitchen—the pots, the ladles and the knives—was big and unwieldy, as if an ogress had been in charge here before Tossia took over. Though tiny, she handled the ogress's utensils very bravely, not at all intimidated by their size. She was amazingly at home in this kitchen shed, as if cooking dinner for lumberjacks was the very thing she was born for.

Xan Xanich was busy with his saw-grinding tool close to the kitchen shed. He gave a friendly sort of cough now and again to make Tossia feel less lonely.

Suddenly the nut bush, halfway between Tossia and Xan Xanich, shook and a blood-chilling growl rose from it.

"What's that? A bear?" Tossia cried in fright and reached for a ladle.

"Bears don't wear boots," Xan Xanich said calmly, indicating a pair of rusty, long uncleaned boots protruding from behind the bush. "It's our foreman having a snooze."

"Does he do it often?" Tossia asked.

"Why shouldn't he? He gets paid all the same. . . ."

A square-faced tractor rumbled past the kitchen shed, hauling a great load of trimmed logs.

"Make the dinner good and hot," the driver called out to Tossia, poking his head out and waving his grease-stained hand.

Tossia followed the tractor with a look of great respect, and then suddenly stamped her foot to put herself in a poetry-making mood. It was an old habit she had. When she was about twelve she discovered that all she had to do was stamp her foot hard, and making up a couple of lines became as easy as anything. These verses of hers were not too brilliant, perhaps, but then Tossia never intended to publish them and never even committed them to paper. She kicked the earth and sang a song of self-praise, made up on the spur of the moment:

*She cooked a lovely dinner,
And came through a winner. . . .*

"Patting your own back, eh?" Xan Xanich said, shaking his head at such immodesty in a girl so young. He immediately regretted his remark which had hurt her feelings perhaps, and asked with encouraging kindness: "How's dinner coming along?"

"All right, I think," Tossia replied, not over-confidently.

She took a taste of the soup, shook her head thoughtfully, and with a desperate gesture threw a tiny pinch of salt into the big pot.

"Is it good?" Xan Xanich asked.

"How do I know? Tastes differ. . ." she broke off, hearing someone call her name. The voice was Katya's.

"Tossia! Hey, Tossia! Bring us some water!"

Tossia looked at Xan Xanich, puzzled.

"Do your cooks have to fetch and carry water too? Is it, what d'you call it, part of their duties or something?"

"It is. . . . Mind your step there, you may get hurt."

"I didn't come here to get hurt!" Tossia said spiritedly. She picked up a pail of water, rinsed a tin mug with boiling water for the sake of hygiene, and marched off to minister to the thirsty lumberjacks.

Fascinated, she watched them at work. The tall, handsome chap called Ilya had the easiest job, she thought. He strode ahead of his team slicing into the thickets with his power saw. No sooner did he touch a tree with his humming, queer-looking saw, than down it went with a crash. To Tossia, this did not even look like work: he was just taking a stroll, it seemed, casually felling trees right and left with fantastic ease. "Don't some chaps get all the soft jobs!" she thought, watching him.

A team of girls headed by Katya pounced on the felled trees at once and started whacking away with their axes. The tractor was to haul away the trimmed trees, and the branches and tops the girls had chopped off were heaped together and burned so they shouldn't clutter up the site, rot there and breed forest pests. What a pity no better use could be made of all those branches.

After the girls came Sasha—a big, clumsy man—who fitted nooses they called chokers on the trimmed logs. He kept glancing at Katya as he worked, but she pretended not to notice his eloquent glances and only betrayed her awareness of him by re-tying her kerchief more often than necessary.

"Sweet on you, is he?" Tossia asked, quick to grasp such things.

"So people say," Katya replied evasively, and tied the ends of her kerchief in a new way.

A crane, mounted on a tractor, dragged the logs together, shaped them into a neat load, and after that the tractor hauled them away to the upper depot for transportation along the narrow-gauge railroad.

Tossia was unimpressed by the whole procedure. It was work like any other, just ordinary work, and there was no call for the lumberjacks to act so high and mighty.

She would have liked to get a closer look at the wonder saw, and to finger it too. But that meant asking a favour of someone she did not know, and climbing over a heap of wind-felled rotted trees besides.

"Hey, whatever your name is, want a drink of water?" she called out to him.

"Who's that squeaking?" Ilya asked, surprised by the strange voice.

He waved his hand invitingly, and Tossia, remembering that it was part of her duties, plunged into the tangle of branches. Ilya drank a full mug of water and asked for more. He drank with relish and, watching him, Tossia suddenly felt terribly thirsty and ran her tongue over her parched lips. She was immediately furious with herself for being so easily affected.

"What makes you so thirsty? And before dinner too," she demanded.

"I'm thirsty in advance," Ilya said, took a long look at her and commented with an enigmatic: "Hm-m."

Tossia sensed an insulting allusion to her size in this, and it put her on her guard against Ilya at once. Besides, seen close to he really was good-looking, even too good-looking for a man, and Tossia could not stand handsome chaps: all of them without exception were so conceited they believed that one look at a plain girl like herself was enough to make her fall head over heels in love with them. She had no intention of falling in love with him, but the very thought that he might be imagining that she was going to, maddened her.

She snatched the empty mug away from him and turned to march off, but the sight of the queer-looking saw lying on a stump made her stop. Her childish curiosity proved stronger than her dislike of its handsome owner.

"What's this funny thing for?" she asked.

"To fell trees with," Ilya explained condescendingly. "And it's not a funny thing, it's a Friendship power saw. Get it?" He looked at Tossia, and rattled off: "Single-cylinder, two-cycle, air-cooled engine. . . ."

"And it's really called Friendship?"

"I told you, didn't I? Are you deaf?"

"Deaf yourself!" Tossia exploded. It annoyed her more and more that he was treating her like a little child and did not seem to be taking her seriously.

Ilya looked at her, wondering what had bitten the girl.

"It's hard to believe that you can fell a tree with this thing," she said, fingering the dusty chain. "This is just like a bicycle chain."

"It is, too!" Ilya agreed. "Funny, I didn't see it before. Your eyes are real sharp, you know."

"They're sharp all right," Tossia said complacently and looked at Ilya with something like benevolence, thinking that maybe he wasn't quite a hopeless case in spite of his swanky good looks.

Ilya pointed to a huge pine, the tallest in that part of the forest.

"Watch me slice through this beauty!"

"I bet you can't," Tossia said uncompromisingly, so that her premature kindness should not prevent this too good-looking chap from mending his ways.

"All right, watch!"

Ilya went up to the huge old pine, chopped away the undergrowth around it, and looked it up and down before deciding how best to tackle the giant. The thick trunk, ribbed near the root, rose straight into the sky like a powerful jet of water. Its crown basked happily in the sun, proudly indifferent to Ilya and his rash intentions. To Tossia, Ilya looked like a tiny bug fussing and pottering at the foot of an invincible giant. Surely he wouldn't be able to fell a tree that, born centuries ago, had survived at least ten generations of people!

Gazing at that majestic pine even Tossia, a flippant girl, was inspired to solemn thought, which was quite out of character for her. Maybe it had been there in the reign of Ivan the Terrible, or Peter the Great. . . . She had to admit, though, that she wasn't too sure which tsar was the more ancient one and which ruled nearer our times. History was rather beyond her altogether, she could never even understand exactly why the century she lived in was called the twentieth, when in writing it down the first two numerals were always 19!

Ilya spat on his hands and switched on the saw. The dusty work-hungry chain whistled through the air and without the least effort bit greedily into the ribbed trunk. A spray of sawdust shot into Ilya's high boots. Tossia watched him approvingly.

Her hands began to itch, she was longing to hold the wonder saw for a moment and cut down a tree, even if only a tiny one.

Having gone about a third of the way through, Ilya removed the saw and started working on the other side of the tree, a little higher up. The saw wailed with the strain as the whole length of the chain entered the trunk. Ilya gave the tree a tentative push with a pole, but though almost sawn through the old pine remained as firm and proud as ever, showing no intention of toppling at all.

"I told you, you couldn't," Tossia said, a little sorry that she had not the right to give Ilya a word of encouragement and instead had to jeer at him for his own good. To show him she had business of her own in the forest and was not hanging about for his sake, she started barking the nearest birch for kindling.

"Think you'll beat me? Like hell you will!" Ilya muttered, provoked and excited by the tree's resistance.

He was cutting deeper and deeper into the tree. Sawdust spurted from the cut in a thick spray, whirled angrily in the air and carpeted the ground in a wide circle. From a distance it looked as if Ilya was wearing a pair of white stockings over his boots, there was so much sawdust on them. Drops of sweat trickled down his forehead and stung his eyes, making the work more difficult still.

"Watch the top," he shouted to Tossia.

Obediently, she craned her neck and looked. The crown, so high up in the sky, trembled, swayed, paused for a moment, unable to believe that its life was over, and then went down, falling faster and faster. The trunk broke in two with a metallic grating. Ilya jerked the saw out of the cut and jumped back, pulling Tossia away with him. With a thundering noise, the pine crashed on the ground, crushing the undergrowth. The root end bounced high, and then lay still. A rain of needles and dry twigs poured down on Ilya and Tossia. Watching her out of the corner of his eye, Ilya brushed the sweat off his forehead, jumped onto the body of the defeated giant, and gave the shout of a victor for all the forest to hear.

"Hey-hey!"

The echo picked up the shout and bore it away over the trees.

Tossia quickly looked away, afraid that her gaze was too rapturous. She wanted to say something careless like: "Good chap! Go on trying," when suddenly she saw Ignat Vasilyevich, the stern chief of the lumber camp, getting down from the tractor in the clearing, and all her educational ideas were scattered in a flash. She picked up her pail, threw away the remaining water, and, guilt written all over her, raced back to the kitchen shed.

Ignat Vasilyevich examined everything in the area earmarked for felling with the scrupulousness of a good manager. This slow-moving, middle-aged man looked more like an ordinary lumberjack dressed up in his Sunday best than a chief of a lumber camp. Here in the forest he fitted into the picture perfectly, and somehow one couldn't imagine him cooped up in an office, sitting behind a desk.

No sooner had Ignat Vasilyevich touched ground than the snoring behind the nut bushes near the kitchen shed came to an abrupt stop, as if an invisible electric current had short-circuited, jolting Churkin awake to warn him of his chief's arrival. He popped out from behind the bush and yelled in a voice husky from sleep: "Go to it, fellows!" He started at a brisk trot towards the boss, brushing the rusty pine needles off his coat as he ran.

When he came panting up, Ignat Vasilyevich angrily flicked a yellow leaf off the man's shoulder and shook his fist at him, turning so the lumberjacks would not see.

They were old friends, and that was the only reason why Churkin remained foreman. Practice alone had taught him all he knew, and he had done well enough at his job ten years or so ago when whip saws were used to cut down the trees and horses to haul the logs away. But now that power saws and diesel tractors had come to replace the whip saws and the nags, Churkin was finding things rather tough.

There was a resemblance in their clothes and faces, ruddy from years of work in the open, that leapt to the eye at once and marked them as men of the same profession. They had been working together for a good thirty years now. There was a time when Ignat Vasilyevich, the younger of the two, was subordinate to

Churkin, first his team leader and then foreman. Later, with both of them foremen, they competed for first place with varying success, and sat side by side at the presidium table during the official part of November 7th and May Day celebrations. Being the two best workers, they were then sent to town to take special courses at the expense of the forest administration. Ignat Vasilyevich studied hard and was appointed chief of the lumber camp when he came back. Churkin found study a bore, and got tripped up by his geometry, as he himself put it. He gave the courses up and never made an attempt to rise above foreman.

About five years ago Churkin's eldest boy and Ignat Vasilyevich's daughter fell in love with each other, and even sat of an evening on the fateful earthen bank called Kamchatka. The two fathers were overjoyed. But then young Churkin was called up for military duty, and in the autumn of 1956 got killed in Hungary. Ignat Vasilyevich's daughter grieved for a while, and then married a seasonal worker from the Ukraine, going back home with him afterwards. And so, instead of his old friend, it was a complete stranger, a Poltava collective farmer, with whom Ignat Vasilyevich found himself related in his old age.

Many of the Komsomol members working at the lumber camp knew nothing of this, and those who did were apt to dismiss it as a thing of the past and unimportant. At every single meeting they levelled sharp criticism at Churkin, they recorded their wrathful accusations in the minutes, and about twice a year unanimously voted that Churkin should be relieved of his post as unsuitable and incompetent. Ignat Vasilyevich admitted the justice of their criticisms, gave Churkin plenty of reprimands—verbal, written, and threatening dismissal—but still Churkin remained foreman.

Ignat Vasilyevich had long been aware that Churkin was doing more harm than good at the camp, but for the sake of their old friendship and the kinship that had not materialised, he played a cheating little game with his conscience, resorting to all sorts of tricks and excuses not to dismiss Churkin, though in his heart of hearts he knew he'd have to do it sooner or later. Let it be later, he thought.

Now, too, he took Churkin behind a dense wall of young firs

and there gave him a telling off that lasted a full thirty minutes. Ignat Vasilyevich did it in private to protect his friend's prestige, although he knew that Churkin had none left to protect.

After that, they made the rounds together. Ignat Vasilyevich indicated the direction in which felling was to proceed and ordered Churkin to keep clear of the marshes before hard frost set in.

"Yes, by all means," Churkin said with a feeling of respect for his chief, which was his invariable and immediate reaction to a severe dressing down.

"Couldn't you have thought of it yourself?"

Churkin scratched behind his ear thoughtfully.

"Well, you see, there are different ways of looking at things," he started on one of his long-winded explanations in self-defence.

Ignat Vasilyevich merely sighed.

They next went to the upper depot. Vera was in charge here. Her job was to see that the trimmed trees, hauled up there by tractor from the forest, were sorted out, loaded on the train pulled by the hard-working "cuckoo" engine, and despatched to the lower depot on the river bank.

Everything was in perfect order here, and Ignat Vasilyevich said to himself not for the first time that if and when he finally worked up the courage to dismiss Churkin he'd give his job to the highly efficient Vera. Before he left, he asked Churkin about the new cook.

"I've a bone to pick with you on that score," Churkin said spitefully, relieved to feel his after-a-scolding respect for his chief melting away. "What I believe in is this: a good accountant must wear glasses, and a good cook must be fat!"

"You should be running the personnel department," Ignat Vasilyevich said laughing, and got aboard the "cuckoo" engine with as much dignity as his Moscow counterpart would exhibit getting into his personal Volga.

Having seen his chief off, Churkin consulted his huge, old-fashioned watch, the size of a saucer, squinted at the sun to check the time, and hurried to the kitchen shed.

"Dinner ready?" he shouted at Tossia, all set on sharing with her the scolding he had just received.

"I think so," Tossia replied.

"Oh, you *think* so!" Churkin mimicked. "All right then, strike the gong!"

Tossia looked about her, but saw no gong to strike.

"Where is it?"

"Have you gone blind?" With an angry nod Churkin indicated a buffer hanging in a corner. "God, what a prize worker!"

"I'll get even with you yet," Tossia thought vindictively, and struck the buffer lightly with a hatchet. Liking the melodious sound, she struck again, harder this time, and then getting into the spirit of things hit the unprotesting piece of metal again and again. The bell-like sounds floated away over the trees. Dancing in her excitement, Tossia yelled at the top of her voice:

"Din-ner! Dinner for the working class! Dinner's ready!"

"Got a loud voice, anyway," Churkin remarked with grudging admiration, and scratched behind his ear.

The forest became silent. The ravenous lumberjacks streamed towards the kitchen shed from all directions.

Tossia stood proudly poised beside her huge pot of soup, arms akimbo, and a smile of motherly welcome on her face. She felt she was the biggest boss there.

"Line up and fall to it," she called out gaily, flourishing her largest ladle.

The lumberjacks settled down to eat wherever they could find a perch. The first to come sat on benches round the crude table, and the rest on stumps and felled trees.

Tossia noticed that crowded though they were, they made room at the table for Ilya. "They like him," she thought. From the mound of sliced bread on the platter, Ilya selected a crusty loaf end, just as Tossia herself would have done, and bit into it with strong teeth. And again, just as his thirst had been relayed to her, she suddenly felt the sourish taste of well-baked rye bread in her mouth, as if she had taken a big bite of Ilya's piece and was enjoying it with him.

"What's the matter with me? It's like a spell, honestly," Tossia thought helplessly, and quickly looked away.

Eager to please, Sasha passed Katya the salt, but got no thanks.

"I can reach, too," she said unfeelingly.

Tossia surreptitiously watched them eat as she dished out the food. Almost all of them were halfway through their soup, but still she was not sure whether her cooking pleased them or not. She caught Sasha's look and gave him a sort of nod to find out what he thought of the meal. He misunderstood her, though, and thought she wanted him to push the bread platter into the middle of the table.

"I say, Xan Xanich, any news about your getting a room?" Sasha asked a moment later with a quick look at the unapproachable Katya to see if she understood that it was not sheer idle curiosity that was prompting him to talk about rooms with a man as nearly married as Xan Xanich.

"They've promised Nadya and me a room in the four-flat house, but they've stopped work on it. All the carpenters have been switched to tree felling," Xan Xanich explained with the readiness of a person asked about his pet ailment. "The way things are run here, there's no chance of marrying soon. And I'm not getting any younger, you know. . . ."

"That you certainly aren't," came with mock sympathy and an insolent grin from a chap in an astrakhan cap,—a rare thing to see in these northern forests,—as he squeezed in between Ilya and Sasha.

This was Fil, the town's notorious rowdy.

"That's the whole point," Xan Xanich agreed, missing the sarcasm.

Tossia's patience had worn thin waiting for someone to praise her cooking.

"How's the soup?" she called to Katya.

"It's hot all right, Tossia," Katya called back, and blew on her spoon.

Honestly, weren't these lumberjacks a slow-witted lot! "Never mind, I'll feed you slops tomorrow," Tossia thought spitefully, sorry she had tried so hard to please them.

Glancing at her casually, Ilya saw disappointment written large

on her face. In a flash he understood what that tiny new girl, who so wanted to be taken seriously, expected of them. He rose and went over to her, without quite knowing why he was doing it.

"The soup's terrific," he said.

"Terrific?" Tossia smiled.

"Sure," Ilya shook her hand heartily. "Thanks from the whole team, and . . . from me personally."

And then all the lumberjacks, finding their tongues, began to praise Tossia and her wonderful soup.

"Your scientists were no fools," Katya called out and gave the thumb-up.

Sasha took a pinch of salt and sprinkled Katya's thumb with it, as much as to say: "Very wonderful plus!" And whether it was Tossia's good dinner that softened her or something else perhaps, for once Katya didn't mind. She did not pull her hand away, and gave Sasha a much kindlier sort of look than girls usually give men who are merely rumoured keen on them.

Even Churkin's temper was mollified.

"It's rich," he said in a kinder tone than usual. "Not bad for a chit of a girl!" He scratched behind his ear, wondering how Tossia could be such a dashed good cook, in spite of her slinness.

"As for me, I guessed she was a good cook right away," Xan Xanich put in. "I could see it in her eyes."

Vera, who only just arrived from the upper depot, was sincerely glad to find Tossia's first dinner such a great success.

"Good for her. Frankly, I had my doubts."

Embarrassed by so much attention, Tossia put on a frown, but she could not hold it long and beamed happily.

"Why . . . I don't know. . . . Of course, if I had more bay leaf. . . ."

Fil alone refused to co-operate.

"Why the fuss?" he grumbled. "It's just ordinary soup. Nothing to write home about."

The general outburst of indignation came so promptly that Tossia had no time to let the insult sink in.

"Wake up, fellow," Ilya told his friend, and pulled the astrakhan cap down on Fil's nose.

Tossia looked at Ilya with mute gratitude, and against her better judgement forgave him his good looks, for after all it wasn't his fault he was born handsome. What could he do now: deliberately contract smallpox or cut off his ears, perhaps? He'd look fine without ears!

She smiled, picturing him like that, stirred the soup with her ladle and, suppressing her mirth, announced in a businesslike tone:

"Who wants a second helping? Line up for more!"

At the Dance

A record-player was going full blast in the large ugly hall of the lumberjacks' club. The footwear of the dancing couples was amazing in its variety: there were walking shoes, top boots, high-heeled slippers, belated summer sandals and premature felt boots. The caretaker, carrying a framed portrait and a hammer, carefully wove his way through the crowd of dancers guarding his precious picture as if it were a priceless masterpiece.

Overcoats, macs and padded jackets lay heaped together on some benches in the corner of the hall. True to an old tradition, the girls who were not dancing were lined up on one wall and the men on the one opposite. Fil, who was slightly drunk, was the centre of a noisy crowd. They all smoked hard, completely ignoring the modest "No Smoking" sign on the wall, and amused themselves by watching the dancing couples and loudly commenting on the girls' best points.

The dominoes addicts slammed their pieces down with such fury as if the whole idea of the game was to smash the table top. Besides this racket there was the banging of the front door, admitting more and more people, singly and in couples. At the door the couples parted, the girls going to "their" wall and the men to "theirs".

Katya entered on the arm of her clumsy Sasha, and Tossia slipped in behind them. Sasha let go of Katya's hand with obvious reluctance and, obeying custom, went to join the other men, while Katya took her stand among the girls. Tossia remained

stranded just inside the door, getting in people's way and not knowing what to do. To make things worse, the record came to an end. The floor emptied quickly, and now Tossia stood there conspicuously alone, looking about her with both curiosity and fear.

"Hey, cook, over here," Fil shouted to her.

Tossia made a step in his direction, but the leering faces of Fil's pals sent her scampering to the safety of the girls' wall. The gang roared and catcalled.

"You shouldn't do that, fellows," Sasha rebuked them in his mild way.

He hated to see the strong hurting the weak, and his blood really boiled when the victim was a little innocent like Tossia. He always applauded the curbing of hooligans by members of the public order squads or simply by decent citizens, and reading about such cases in the newspaper he was always glad that right and justice were being maintained. Sasha himself never did anything he'd be ashamed of, and hooliganism in any form was something he could not stand. If it were up to him, he'd collect all the riff-raff there was in the country, put the lot in the holds of an old, written-off ship, take it far out to sea, and scuttle it with the human scum on board. Sasha was a man of strong opinions.

And yet, when it came nearer home, Sasha did not seem to see that Fil and his pals did the very things the public order squads and the newspapers were trying so hard to combat. And it wasn't that he was afraid of Fil. Not at all. Sasha wasn't afraid of anyone in this lumber town, and if it came to a showdown he'd make short work of half the gang with his two fists alone. It simply did not occur to him that Fil and his pals were hooligans. It honestly didn't. Sasha wasn't dense or anything, but there it was.

In the newspaper accounts it was all very clear: so and so was a hooligan, a menace to society, he had to be locked behind bars. But the same yardstick could not be applied to Fil and his pals, they were not like those real toughs! As far as Sasha was concerned those blokes mentioned in the papers were hooligans and that was all they were. Now most of Fil's gang Sasha had known all his life, he worked with them and they did a pretty good job too. He disapproved of their behaviour, of course, but he

could not bring himself to take a firm stand against his childhood friends and workmates. He kept hoping they'd grow out of it, but they certainly seemed to be taking their time.

Anyway, Sasha honestly believed that it was much easier for those staunch fellows the newspapers wrote about to grab their hooligans by the scruff of the neck and give them what-for than it was for him. They had no trouble discerning what was black and what was white. But here at home everything was sort of mixed up and very confusing. That same Fil who had just made such cruel fun of the new girl for the amusement of his gang, had worked with him in the forest all day. Fil had given him his last cigarette when Sasha's had run out, and next day they'd be sharing a desk at night school. . . .

The caretaker, safely reaching the wall, stopped right in front of Tossia. Choosing where best to hang the picture, he pushed her out of his way, first to the left, then to the right, and then started hammering a huge nail into the wall. He hung up the picture, stepped back a few paces to admire his work, and informed Tossia solemnly: "Our front-ranker!"

Tossia gazed at the portrait with due respect. The front-ranker was a young man with a deerskin cap on his head and a power saw in his hands. The face reminded her of someone, but she was positive she had never seen a plum of a nose like that on anyone's face before. The local artist had put his all into the saw. The cap was a success too, but the face was flat and dead. The strangely familiar person with the saw in his hands and the bland expression of righteousness on his face could be a sort of lumbermen's saint, a believer in mechanisation.

A crowd of curious girls came flocking to the portrait.

"I say, who is it?"

"Looks like Ilya. . . ."

"Never!"

"Take a look at the cap."

"Yes, the cap's his all right."

Tossia took a good look at the portrait and recognised Ilya Kovrigin, the lumberjack. Heaven forbid that a dabbler like that should ever want to paint her. She'd be some sight!

The big, fat girl wearing huge ear-rings, who was voluntarily taking care of the record-player, put on a new record. Sasha came and danced Katya away. Tossia hoped and prayed that someone would ask her for a dance, but all the girls round her had been swished away, and she alone still stood under the portrait as if put there to guard it.

Idly, Tossia watched the dancing couples. The lumberjacks, she noticed, were not treating the girls too politely, they could have been doing them a favour, the way they danced. Some of them did not even bother to throw away their cigarettes, and the rudest actually left their partners in the middle of a dance if the fancy took them.

"Look at them!" Tossia thought, appalled. What amazed her was that the local girls took it so meekly. They seemed quite used to this sort of treatment. "The pigs!" Tossia fumed. She'd like one of those louts with a cigarette dangling from his lips to ask her to dance and then leave her in the middle of the floor! She'd show him, she'd teach him manners!

But more records were played and still no one asked Tossia to dance, when she so wanted to teach the lumberjacks a lesson. All the girls who were not dancing crowded round the record-player, and Tossia was a lonely wall-flower, standing there under Ilya's portrait. The lilting tune and the words seemed to jeer at her.

*When the music starts to play,
You're the first to dance away. . . .*

Her very toes tingled, she so wanted to dance. "Please won't someone ask me, any one!" Tossia prayed, forgetting all her vindictive intentions. But the young lumberjacks manfully propped up the wall on their side of the room and completely ignored Tossia's presence. She might not have been there at all for all they cared. Katya sailed past in Sasha's arms and gave her a heartening smile. It was all very well for *her* to smile! If Tossia were in her place she'd do even better than that.

But maybe it was silly envying Katya. Sasha was such a clumsy

fellow, he kept treading on Katya's toes, and his dancing was really hopeless.

"Ouch, you *are* clumsy!" Katya moaned, grimacing with pain.

"I do better to the accordion," Sasha grumbled in self-defence. "And this thing here plays such soppy music, you can't follow it. . . . I'm only doing this for you!"

"And that's why I grin and bear it," Katya admitted.

Sasha beamed happily and trod hard on Katya's dainty shoe with his huge heavy boot.

"Let's take a breather, shall we?" he suggested remorsefully.

"Never mind, let's go on dancing," Katya said through her tears.

Vera walked up to Tossia. No one asked her to dance either, but it did not seem to worry her. Tossia looked hard at her to see if the older girl really did not care about dancing or if she was only pretending, but there was no telling with those thirty-year-old women, correspondence students at that.

"Well, how d'you like our club?" Vera asked.

"The club's not bad," Tossia said, looking about the big room. "But there's not much cultural work done here, as far as I can see."

Vera nodded in agreement, and in the next breath explained it all to Tossia in scientific terms:

"It is a frequently observable disparity. The superstructure invariably falls short of the material basis. Does it not?"

Tossia looked bored at once. She felt the highly-educated Vera must be at odds with her learning somewhere, if she was using it to explain away all the disgraceful things that went on here. However, Tossia did not dare argue with her learned friend, and mumbled evasively:

"We didn't get as far as that in night school. . . ."

The front door was flung open and slammed shut with a bang, and in walked Ilya. . . . Seen in the flesh there was nothing of a painted saint about him, and his cap was the only thing to identify him as the man immortalised on the portrait. With a cigarette in his mouth, he strode to the opposite end of the room through the crowd of dancers, shaking hands with the men in passing and nodding carelessly to the girls. He stopped not three feet away

from Tossia. At the very thought that now, at long last, she would be asked for a dance, her breath caught, and lost to all shame, she all but stepped forward.

"And who's that bird up there?" Ilya demanded, glancing at his portrait.

All the wall-flowers came running to him, giggling servilely.

"Don't you know yourself?"

Ilya took a closer look.

"Is that me?" His amazement was quite sincere.

"Look at the cap."

"It's my cap all right," he admitted and shook his head. "Art, they call it!"

Without taking his eyes off the portrait, he stretched out an arm in the direction of the girls with the indolent conceit of a village beau. The hand hung suspended in mid-air between Tossia and the girl with the ear-rings. In spite of herself Tossia moved forward. She was immediately terrified at what she had done, but it was too late. Blindly, Ilya's arm found her and swept her away in the dance. Anxious not to disgrace herself with this celebrated lumberjack, Tossia tried her hardest to follow him, her expression as strained as if she were doing a terribly difficult algebra sum. And just as she got into the swing, the music stopped.

"You're out of luck, Dussia," he said graciously.

Should she stand for this sort of thing too, or should she take offence? Tossia was too confused to decide.

"My name's Tossia," she said softly.

"It doesn't matter," Ilya assured her, and walked away to the men's side of the room.

Tossia had a tiny hope that he'd dance the next dance with her too, but he vanished. A little later he reappeared with Anfissa. They waltzed past Tossia and she felt the warm little breeze they raised, both of them tall and good-looking, a beautiful couple. Tossia felt plain and puny in comparison. It seemed incredible that only a minute before Ilya had danced with her. And what was she, after all? Just an ugly little peanut. All she was good for was guarding other people's portraits. She had lost out on beauty but at least she could have had a few inches added

to her height, she'd look like something then. But no, she was out of luck there too. Most likely her mother hadn't given her enough vitamins in the first year of her life, Tossia thought, remembering the pamphlet she had read when working for the assistant professor and his post-graduate wife to get a smattering of knowledge so as to look after their baby girl in a really scientific way. Of course, her mother couldn't have bothered with vitamins when the war was on.

Youngsters, who had got in without tickets, were now arranging the benches in rows for the film show, under the caretaker's supervision. Tossia wished they'd hurry and start the movie. Who wanted to dance anyway?

"Shall we?" an oily voice spoke close to Tossia's ear.

She swung round and saw Fil. Oh well, this was better than nothing. She moved closer to him, placed her hand on his shoulder and recoiled with a grimace of disgust.

"What's wrong?" Fil asked.

"You simply reek of vodka, how can you ask a girl to dance?"

"But it's not vodka, it's moonshine," Fil explained.

"What's the difference?"

"There's quite a big difference," Fil said patronisingly, and added: "Look, I won't breathe on you. . . ."

"That won't do much good."

"Who the hell d'you think you are? It's payday, and then I got a bonus besides. . . . And I only had that much."

Fil showed with his thumb and forefinger how little he had had.

"Go away, I'm not going to dance with you."

"Girlie, you'll regret this," Fil said in caressing tones, gave Tossia a dirty look, and sauntered back to his gang.

"You are a brave one," the girl with the ear-rings said, surprised. "I can see you haven't been taught our ways yet."

"You're all nuts, the whole bunch of you," Tossia said scornfully.

In the break between dances, she saw Fil walk up to Ilya and whisper to him with a nod in her direction. Ilya chuckled and gave Tossia a curious glance. And although they stood quite a

distance away, Tossia fancied that Ilya was laughing not at her but at Fil.

Katya came to see how her wall-flower friend was doing. She looked so indecently happy, it actually embarrassed Tossia as though Katya had suddenly taken off her clothes in public. Sasha must have said something wonderful to her, while treading all over her feet. Looking at her, Tossia swore that never, no matter how staggering her happiness, would she wear that stupid, unbearably happy look that was an insult to other girls.

"Why aren't you dancing?" Katya asked.

"The floor here . . . it's uneven," Tossia made a lame excuse.

"I haven't noticed. . . . Look, I'll get Sasha to dance with you if you like."

Wasn't it bad enough without her breaking up happy couples? It was amazing how popular girls loved giving their less lucky friends a break. There was nothing they liked so much as doing a good deed when no one asked them to. Tossia simply could not miss this chance of getting her own back.

"Thanks ever so much, but I need my feet for better things. We can't all be cripples, one's enough."

"Please yourself." Katya felt hurt for her clumsy Sasha and limped away.

Tossia did manage to do a polka with a schoolgirl, one of those fast kids who always hang about where the grownups are and love nothing so much as watching films for the not under-sixteens. She wanted to dance again, but Tossia sent her packing, she didn't like the girl treating her as an equal.

And so she stood by the "girls' " wall, little enjoying herself and hoping the movie would begin soon. Ilya danced past her again, not with Anfissa now, but with a girl who worked at the canteen.

"Safety in numbers, that means he hasn't got a girl." The voice that whispered this to Tossia belonged to someone else, some stranger slumbering in her until now and suddenly roused. Unused as she was to such abstract thinking, Tossia could not believe at first that it was her own thought. Goodness, it almost made her as wise as Vera and her higher education! But before she

could really enjoy this newly found gift of hers, Ilya whirled past again with the giggling canteen girl in his arms.

For a fleeting second Tossia's eyes met his, and she fancied he read all her hidden thoughts as in a book, he read them and understood that life must be pretty grim to make her do something as alien to her nature as deep thinking. She thought Ilya even felt sorry for her—poor, ugly shrimp that nobody cared for. Pity from him was about the last thing she wanted! Biting her lip to keep back her tears, Tossia rushed outside.

The porch was seething with life of its own, crowded with boys and girls who had no tickets and all of them begging the old man on duty to let them in. A youngster of fourteen or so was smoking, blowing the smoke into his sleeve, and looking about him warily. Tossia seemed to tumble out of the adult world, which she was beginning to feel a part of, and land in her childhood again, not so long past but already forgotten.

"Here you are!" Fil pounced on her like a hawk.

Tossia leapt down the steps and picked up a big stick.

"Don't try coming near me!"

"Drop that stick," Fil said sternly and stepped down from the porch.

"That's not the way to court a girl, man," the old ticket man lisped.

Tossia raised her lethal weapon.

"I'll knock you over the head!"

"Can't you take a joke?" Fil spat on the ground in disgust and wept inside again.

Keeping hold of the stick that had saved her life, Tossia strolled down the sleeping street. The first frost had touched the ground and covered the puddles with a brittle film that cracked with a glassy tinkle when Tossia stepped on it. The circular saw had stopped its buzzing for the night, and the town was amazingly quiet. The only sounds came from the lower depot where logs were being noisily unloaded from the train. Tossia stepped onto the wooden pavement. There was no squelching mud underfoot now and the boards echoed the tapping of Tossia's heels with a nice, crisp sound. That was a good floor to dance on!

In the sky above hung the thin crescent of the new moon, all by its lonesome self. It made Tossia feel better to realise she wasn't the only lonely soul in this world.

The crescent moon hung sideways to the earth, to make it harder for a rocket to hit it. Tossia suddenly wanted terribly to see a rocket hit it and strike a spark this very minute when she was watching, with no one else in the world witnessing it. All right, let the scientists watch, the ones who keep their eyes glued to their telescopes and get medals and huge salaries for it. Tossia had no quarrel with scientists generally.

She stood there for a full minute craning her neck and hoping the made-to-order miracle would happen. Maybe it would have, if she had waited long enough, but the lights in the club went out just then.

"They're starting! It's on!" yelled the ticketless youngsters on the porch.

Tossia dropped her stick and raced back to the club.

Once Upon a Time. . . .

. An icy wind howled outside, bringing the hoots of the "cuckoo" train from the lower depot, the clanging of buffers and the clatter of logs.

Vera looked up from her book. All the girls were there except Tossia. Nadya was frying potatoes for Xan Xanich's supper, Anfissa was fixing her hair in front of the mirror, getting ready to go on night duty, and Katya, all dressed up for her first real date with Sasha, was looking into the mirror over her shoulder, spitting on her finger tips and pinching her colourless eyebrows into a darker line.

Two weeks had passed since Tossia's arrival. Vera had grown attached to the funny, frisky child, and found herself taking all her joys and sorrows to heart.

Tossia's favourite movie stars were all pinned to the wall above her bed together with the glossy pictures she regularly ripped out of illustrated magazines. She was a true-blue cook in her choice of

subject too, and preferred good-to-eat still life to the loveliest of landscapes. No colours could be too bright to please her, and as a result her wall was the most exotic part of the room.

The door was kicked open, banging back against the wall, and Tossia, radiant and carrying a load of paper bags and packages, walked in. Without looking back, she kicked the door shut with the agility of an invalid who had long learned to do without his hands, and dropped her parcels on the table.

"Come and get it," she yelled.

She tore open all the paper bags, found the one with her favourite sweets and held it out to all the girls in turn.

"Here, take the red ones, they're the best!"

Tossia herself took a yellow one, to leave more of the red ones for the others. She was just as generous to the cat Anfissa, putting a handful of sweets on the table in front of her mirror. Anfissa looked up in surprise and automatically popped a sweet in her mouth.

"Blew all your pay on this, I suppose?" Vera wanted to know. She was so much older, she felt she had the right to scold Tossia for being a young spendthrift.

"So what?" Tossia gave a careless wave of her hand. "The way I see it, money is earned to be spent. It's true, isn't it, Mummy Vera?"

"Hear, hear," came from Anfissa.

Tossia swung round to give Anfissa a fit rejoinder, but the sight of Katya making herself pretty claimed her entire attention.

"This dress doesn't suit you," Tossia stated flatly. "You'd better put on Vera's blouse and Anfissa's black skirt." And without bothering to ask, Tossia got the other girls' clothes out of the wardrobe and draped them on Katya. "That's much better, isn't it, girls?"

Anfissa merely shrugged. Nadya gave Katya an incurious glance, and turned to her potatoes again. Vera did not so much as look.

"You *are* a selfish lot," Tossia said in disgust. "It's Katya's first date, and you don't give a hang!"

"All you think about is dates," Vera said reproachfully. "Can't you think of something more serious?"

"Oh, Mummy Vera! When I get to be thirty I'll think of nothing but international affairs, I swear. I'll do it from morning to night, without even a break for lunch." Tossia tossed the skirt and blouse to Katya. "Here, put these on."

Katya indicated the sulky Anfissa with her eyes.

"Mummy Vera, Anfissa, may she?" Tossia asked somewhat belatedly.

Vera nodded her permission, and Anfissa shrugged vaguely, marvelling at Tossia's lack of respect for other people's property, no doubt a result of her children's home breeding. Katya put the things on quickly, afraid that Anfissa might change her mind and refuse to let her wear her best skirt.

"Sasha will take one look and fall dead!" Tossia declared, bustling around Katya, eager to make her look her very best.

Anfissa sat on her bed, dangling a leg in a sheer stocking and watching the silly fuss Tossia was raising, with the mocking condescension of an old hand. Nadya, too, watched Katya out of the corner of her eye. In those quick looks there was the avid curiosity of a person who has missed much of the fun other, luckier girls were granted in this life, such as the thrill of going on a first real date that Katya was simply tingling with just then.

Tossia, whom no one had ever dated yet, kept pestering Katya with questions.

"What exactly did he say? Come, I'll be waiting for you?"

"Something like that," Katya mumbled, embarrassed to find herself in the limelight.

"Aren't you lucky, Katya!" Tossia said enviously. "Look, take my brooch."

"It won't be seen with the coat on."

"Put it on anyway. At least my brooch will have been on a date."

Tossia dived under her bed, got the brooch out of her suitcase, —a big flashy thing, her only ornament—and pinned it on Katya's

breast. In spite of herself Anfissa was affected by Tossia's unselfish concern for her friend, and she too felt like contributing something, advice at least.

"If he tries to kiss you, push your elbows out like this." Anfissa who knew all about such things showed Katya how.

Tossia repeated the gesture, storing the knowledge away in her mind, just in case. "It may come in useful one day, who knows," she thought.

"And if he gets really fresh, slap him straight on the face, it does cool them off," Anfissa continued. "But you'll never do it." She eyed Katya critically. "At least try not to throw yourself into his arms straightaway, put him off as much as you can, he'll want you all the more then."

"But why should Katya pretend she doesn't love Sasha when she does?" Tossia asked.

"Love, my eye!" Anfissa sneered, examining a bottle of lotion she was holding up against the light. "There's no such thing as love."

"There isn't?" Tossia cried, shocked. "What's happened to it?"

"There never has been any," Anfissa declared, greatly enjoying Tossia's astonishment. "It's all a lie, people have made it up to make life prettier.... There's only one thing all men are after. You can take my word for it."

Tossia looked about her in confusion, seeking support.

"And ... Pushkin, too, was lying then? 'I loved you, and my love perhaps. ...'"

"*Perhaps!* You said it!" Anfissa mimicked her.

"Stop scaring the child," Vera told her. "Don't listen to her, Tossia."

"I can think for myself, thank you," Tossia flared up, and stared fixedly at Anfissa. "I'm sorry for you, Anfissa, if you really mean it," she said, and then she turned to Katya and whispered in her ear, as if it were something too intimate and shameful to ask out loud: "Will you go with him to Kamchatka if he asks you?"

In the fortnight she had been there, Tossia had come to know all the local customs. There were certain unwritten laws about

going to Kamchatka, recognised and obeyed by the whole community. For a girl to go there with a fellow was tantamount to announcing her engagement to him. Instead of saying "they are engaged" in the formal old way, people here said "they've been going to Kamchatka". Practically all the young married couples in town had gone through Kamchatka, and most of the older people had pleasant memories of it as well.

"We'll see. . ." Katya replied evasively.

Tossia stared at her with childish awe, and then turned to Anfissa with an air of firm resolve.

"Give Katya a little scent. Be a sport."

Anfissa held the bottle out to Katya without a word. Tossia grabbed it and sniffed.

"You've got better stuff, I know. Give it to her."

"Aha! I caught you out at last!" Anfissa gloated. "I'll teach you to rummage in other people's tables!"

Tossia advanced on her, all ready for battle.

"Have you seen me do it?"

Anfissa felt with her hand far inside the drawer and brought out a small, precious bottle of scent which she kept hidden at the very back.

"There!" she announced, holding it up to the light. "I knew it when I made that scratch on it yesterday, and now the level is much lower. If I ever catch you at it, I'll pull your arms out of their sockets."

"I'd like to see you try," Tossia said much less aggressively, and moved away from Anfissa.

Making that scratch was certainly a sly trick, Tossia thought in dismay. It was a good thing the pictures on the wall were in such urgent need of straightening!

Katya glanced at the clock and gasped.

"I'm late!" she cried, rushing out.

The potatoes Nadya was frying began to sizzle with noisy plops. Anfissa grimaced with disgust.

"Honestly, why do you bother with supper every night? Why not eat at the canteen?"

"I like doing it," Nadya replied sulkily.

"Oh, Nadya, don't mind what she says!" Tossia, her embarrassment over, rushed into battle. "She'll snap everyone's heads off if you give her a chance. A cat, that's what she is!" Challenging Anfissa to a fight, Tossia marched towards her bravely and said with belated fury: "And if somebody did pinch your lousy scent why does it have to be me?"

"No one else would do it," Anfissa replied with conviction.

"You can keep your silly scent," Tossia would not give up. "I'll buy myself a gallon if I want to!"

"Go ahead, and stop pinching mine."

"I will too!"

"Go on, do. . . . Remember to get some powder too, you're always poking your nose into my powder box."

"I like that! Who wants your powder? When I've none I do just as well with tooth powder. I'm not so finicky as some I could name!"

"Stop that row!" Vera ordered sternly. "It makes me sick to listen to you two. And you, Tossia, you really amaze me!"

Tossia stamped her foot and sang a verse of her own making:

*Amazing people was her lot,
She simply was that way. . . .*

"The poetess!" Anfissa gave a snort. "Pushkin in tomato sauce!"

"I do it as well as I can," Tossia was hurt and looked malevolently at Anfissa.

"I say, Tossia, have you done your homework?" Vera hastened to ask before a new row started.

"I don't think we have any homework, Mummy Vera," Tossia quibbled and staunchly stood Vera's searching, suspicious look.

"Tossia, shame!"

"I'm sick and tired of every one of you! I'm sorry I ever entered night school. . . ."

Tossia meant it, she often regretted joining school, but nevertheless she obediently got out her books and settled down at the table.

Angrily she leafed through her arithmetic book, found the sum she was supposed to do and before tackling it looked up the answer at the back, an old school habit of hers. She sat making faces, wondering how to get that answer. Silence, which came here but rarely, fell in the room for a short while. Anfissa went back to her mirror-gazing, and Vera curled up on her hammock-like bed again with her exciting plump novel.

"Where are you now? They're not married yet?" Tossia asked Vera in an ingratiating little voice.

"Do your sum, child."

"Gosh, you're a mean lot!" Tossia cried in exasperation. "You're always bullying me. . . . Don't you ever get tired of it?" Clutching her head in her hands she stared at her sum with hatred and muttered: "The train left the station at. . . ."

Someone knocked softly on the door.

"Come in if you're so polite," Tossia called out, welcoming the chance of forgetting her sum for a moment.

The door opened the merest slit, and Xan Xanich, Nadya's fiancé, edged into the room.

Xan Xanich was the most useful person in the community, and enjoyed everyone's respect. Officially he was a saw-grinder, but he could also do a carpenter's and fitter's job, and in an emergency he could fix a winch, unlock a door without a key, and even repair a wrist watch. Xan Xanich's industrious hands were always itching for something to do, he felt all right when he was fixing something and terribly uneasy in his rare moments of enforced idleness, as though he were cheating people.

It always embarrassed him to come here and he very clumsily tried to hide it behind a most unconvincing attempt at jocular familiarity. As usual, he went up to everyone in turn to shake hands.

"Vera Ivanovna, my respects. . . . Study hard, Tóssia, you'll make a professor yet. . . . And here's our beautiful Anfissa, growing prettier every day. . . ."

Having performed this daily ritual, Xan Xanich went up to Nadya, looked into her eyes to make sure he had not displeased her and, exercising his right as her fiancé, tenderly squeezed her

arm above the elbow. Nadya nodded at him graciously, and placed the pan of piping-hot potatoes on the corner of the table.

"You're so good at frying potatoes, Nadya dear," Xan Xanich said emotionally.

They sat side by side, eating their supper like an old married couple.

"Any news about the house, Xan Xanich?" Vera asked.

He waved hopelessly.

"I just can't understand Ignat Vasilyevich at all. He says he wants to help Nadya and me, and yet he's gone and put a stop to the work on the house again."

"It's the plan catching up on him," said Vera. "Too true, we haven't yet learnt to combine production with everyday needs."

"That's as may be, but it doesn't make things any easier for Nadya and me. To think that two people's happiness should hinge on a bit of dwelling space. . . ."

Xan Xanich let his sentence trail, and waved despondently again.

"A disgrace, that's what it is!" Tossia, quick to sympathise, banged on the table in anger. "They've got a vacant room, yet they won't let you have it! You ought to write to the newspaper about it."

Tossia stole a look at Vera, expecting a reproof. All the girls, however, were so keen on getting Nadya and Xan Xanich happily settled, that even Vera, so strict as a rule, thought Tossia's hanging justified and said nothing about her getting on with the sum.

"You wrote about that agronomist of yours, and where did it get you?" Anfissa put in.

"Oh, he'll get what's coming to him, don't worry," Tossia said with conviction.

"They're keeping the vacant room for the new engineer who's due soon, they say. . . ." Xan Xanich explained meekly.

"A new engineer?" Anfissa scoffed. "You make me laugh! I can just see a real engineer coming to this lousy lumber camp! If I were you, Xan Xanich, I'd just move in. Let them try to throw you out afterwards."

"How can I, without permission? There's a lock on the door. . . ."

"Come off it!" Anfissa rebuked him. "There isn't a lock you can't open, you know that very well."

"She's right!" Tossia approved the idea. "Even if it's Anfissa who said it, it is right. And I, what d'you call it, second it."

"Why *even*?" Anfissa demanded haughtily.

"Oh, go on with you," Tossia left it at that, and jumping to her feet, cried excitedly: "Xan Xanich, dear Xan Xanich, let's go and break in, shall we? Come on, you can pick that lock easily. And we'll all dance at your wedding tomorrow! I've never been to a wedding in my life. . . . Come on, Xan Xanich!"

Xan Xanich stole a look at Nadya who was sitting dumbly beside him, and shook his head.

"No, that won't do," he said regretfully. "Nadya and I will have to wait until we're given a room lawfully."

Disappointed, Tossia flopped down on her stool.

"I'm still waiting," Anfissa reminded her. "Why did you say that *even if it's me*. . . ."

"Why? Why? Why?" Tossia exploded. "A skinflint like you, you'd kill a person for a drop of scent!"

"Now it's my fault. How d'you like that! Oh, I know!" Anfissa smirked. "You're still mad because none of the boys want to dance with you and all keep asking me? I saw you making eyes at them at the club."

Vera closed her book.

"Mind what you're saying, she's only a child. . . ."

"Some child!" Anfissa snorted. "You're way back in the nineteenth century, Vera, with all that reading. All these children dream about is getting themselves a husband!"

"Not me!" Tossia scoffed at the very idea. "Maybe I'll be an old maid, who knows."

"You will, too!" Anfissa examined Tossia from head to toe with eyes that missed nothing. "You're so cocky, but incidentally your legs are grotesque!"

"They are what?" It sounded really bad. Puzzled, Tossia looked at her legs which had served her so faithfully all her life, rescuing

her from many a fix, and which now, it appeared, were not the right kind.

"Gro-tesque! Look it up in the dictionary, it'll do you good."

In her ignorance, Tossia wasn't sure what the word meant, applied to her legs, and that made the insult worse.

"And you . . . you . . ." she floundered in her impotent rage, "you're a disgrace to all women. There!"

"Tossia!" Vera warned her protege.

But Tossia was past caring, and not even Vera with her unquestioned authority of correspondence student and room senior could stop her now.

"Yes, my name is Tossia! I've been Tossia for seventeen years and six weeks now! You'd better take a good look at Anfissa. Everyone knows, but no one says anything, it's disgusting. . . . What are you so dolled up for, I ask you? You're only going to work, aren't you?"

"That's none of your business," Anfissa snapped. "A nasty little busybody, that's all you are!"

They stood on either side of Xan Xanich, shouting at one another across his bald pate. He bent low over his fried potatoes and pretended to be quite unaware of the storm raging over his head.

"It is my business!" shouted Tossia. "The whole town is talking about you and the things you do on night duty with your boy friends! I wonder you're not scared. You'll end up one of those unmarried mothers one fine day, then you'll know!"

"Poor, innocent Tossia!" Anfissa said with an air of superiority. "One has to know one's way about in such matters." She picked up her knife from the table and put it away. "The times I've told you not to take things without asking first. . . . When you're through with supper, put my chair back, will you, Xan Xanich."

Xan Xanich leapt to his feet in a flurry. Anfissa put on her beautiful squirrel coat, and paused for a minute in the doorway.

"Sweet dreams, girls. And may Tossia dream of a whole regiment of lovers. Love, ha, ha!"

Laughing, Anfissa ran out of the room. Nadya gave Xan

Xanich another chair, while Tossia carried Anfissa's to her corner and plunked it down with an angry bang.

"Don't worry," Xan Xanich said reassuringly to Nadya. "I'll make us a chair when I have time. We'll be independent then."

Tossia walked up to Anfissa's fascinating bedside table, a magnet that never failed to attract her. To begin with, she kicked Anfissa's chair and mimicked Anfissa's "Don't touch . . . the times I've told you!" Then she fingered all the scent bottles and sniffed one of them. "Where does she get such smelly stuff?" Tossia marvelled, and furtively, so the others could not see, dabbed a little on.

"Tossia!" Vera called out sternly.

"Other people's scent always smells nicer," Tossia declared. "Don't worry, she won't notice anything." Holding up the bottle to the light, she carefully poured in a teaspoonful of water. "A fat lot I care for her scratches!" Gazing at herself in the mirror she said dreamily: "Oh, girls, if you only knew what I wouldn't give to be beautiful! I wouldn't let a single man come anywhere near me, I'd pay them back for all the girls they've jilted. I can see myself walking down the street, a beautiful girl. . . ."

Tossia reached for Anfissa's lace pillow cover, put it on like a veil, and swinging her shoulders with clumsy grace, walked up and down the room, to show the others how she'd stroll down the street if her cherished dream came true and she suddenly became a raving beauty.

"All the boys would be struck dumb, and the weaker ones would simply collapse in heaps!"

Reaching her arms high above her head Tossia showed how tall the pile would be.

"Oh, Tossia, you are a scream!" Nadya said and smiled for the first time that evening.

"And one of those poor blokes crushed in that pile would think: what's that shrimp doing here?" Vera needled Tossia.

Tossia was cut to the quick.

"I'm not so small really, and if I wear very high heels I'll be a good medium height. . . . Have you noticed that all women look prettier as soon as they put on fancy shoes?"

Vera put her book aside.

"It's becoming an obsession with you. Hasn't it ever occurred to you that life's more difficult for the beautiful ones, it offers more temptations. . . ."

"Give me their difficulties any day," Tossia mumbled and suddenly brought her fist down hard on the table. "But anyway it's all wrong! I don't agree!"

"What with?" Vera asked.

"The same thing still. Take our Anfissa for example: she never moved a finger and got everything free—good looks, popularity and everything else. Why didn't we? Tell me that. Aha, you can't answer that one!" Tossia rejoiced in her triumph over old, wise Vera. "Or maybe it's the way it's supposed to be: some get all the good things and others the leavings? It would be different if we were asked before getting born: you're going to be like this, agree? But we're not asked. They bring you into the world and leave you to make the best of it. If there was a god in heaven at least you'd know who'd played you that dirty trick. But since there's no god, there's no one to blame. It's no use blaming nature, it's like hitting your head against a brick wall. And why do people say we're all equal!"

"We are equal but not identical," Vera replied.

This baffled Tossia, the simple soul. Honestly, the number of words people had invented that were alike and yet different just to confuse the meaning!

"Naturally I can't argue with you, look at all the books you've read, only it's baffling. This beauty thing is like our lottery: everyone pays three rubles a ticket but one wins a gold watch and another the best wishes for a happy new year. Well anyway, nature has certainly made a mess here."

"That's right, give nature a good scolding, Tossia," Xan Xanich put in.

"And I will too! It's not right at all. They're born beautiful, and then for the rest of their lives they—what d'you call it—collect interest."

"It's all a waste of breath," Nadya said testily. "It has always been that way and that's how it will always be. Even when

there's complete communism, some will be beautiful and others . . . just so-so. There's no remedy for it."

It seemed that all these thoughts about nature's unfairness were not new to Nadya.

"There will be a remedy! Science will find it!" Tossia cried with conviction.

She sat down and attacked her sum fiercely as if that would speed up the progress of science. But at the very first attempt to solve the wretched sum, her splendid determination went up in smoke. No, it was no easy thing to push science ahead.

"Well, science is making headway, of course," mumbled Xan Xanich, quite unable to understand why Nadya was taking all this tomfoolery so seriously. "Maybe we'll live to see the day when repair shops for humans will be set up. Say, you're tired of your nose. Well, you just pop into one of those repair shops, and come out with a brand-new nose, any kind you like—a straight one, or hooked, maybe."

Xan Xanich was the first to laugh at his own joke, but he choked in embarrassment, apologising for his flippancy, so unbecoming for a man his age.

"You walk into the hostel with your new nose and they refuse to let you in," Tossia gleefully caught it up. "'We don't know you,' they'll say!"

"Stop talking rot," Nadya said surlily.

Vera also thought Tossia needed a little lecturing.

"You're taking a very narrow view of life, you're seeing it from one angle only. Anyone would think beauty was everything! You can be happy without being dazzlingly beautiful if you have a loving family, a job you're keen on, the respect of your comrades. . . ."

Tossia swept it all away with a gesture of disdain.

"That's just empty talk! It's only said to console people like me. . . . You show me the happiest of your happy women who has the most loving family and doesn't wish she was beautiful. I haven't seen one yet," Tossia yawned. "Tell me, Mummy Vera, why do I get so terribly sleepy when we start talking seriously?"

"Because you're not old enough yet," Vera said testily, and picked up her novel again.

"You said it!" Tossia agreed with alacrity, a big smile on her face. "Look, I've got a wonderful idea! If I was nature I'd do it this way: people wouldn't be born either beautiful or ugly, and when they got to be about seventeen I'd give them as much beauty as they deserved, that is if I was nature. I'd take everything into account: how they worked, how they treated other girls, whether they were greedy or generous, the things they dreamed about, everything, everything. . . . There, take what you deserve and enjoy yourself. That would be fair and square, but the way things are now you're cheated of inches and get any sort of face to wear until you die! Well, Mummy Vera, d'you like my idea?"

"What a child you are!" Vera replied, and then made another attempt to put the stray lamb on the straight and narrow.

"Can't you see that beauty is not enough for real happiness by itself? Take Anfissa, she's very good-looking. She's the best-looking girl in this room, perhaps. . . ."

"There's no perhaps about it, she just is!" Tossia broke in, her sense of fair play stronger than her dislike. "She's mean though, she's a proper witch. The way I see it, a good-looking person should be an angel of kindness. Why be mean if you're beautiful? Don't you agree, Nadya?"

"How would I know? You've asked the wrong person, my mother and father didn't hand me down too much beauty. . . ."

"Why, Nadya dear!" said Xan Xanich, cleaning up the frying pan with a piece of bread. "You're always running yourself down so!"

Nadya began to clear the table. Tossia, suddenly noticing some dirt on the floor, went up to the time-table pinned on the side of the wardrobe to see whose turn it was to clean the room.

"What a pity I didn't know it was Anfissa's turn," she said with profound regret. "I'd show her, the hellcat. She's had people do things for her all her life, and all because of her looks. . . . Oh, bother her and her looks!"

"All right, Tossia, you've done quite enough chattering for one night." Vera's tone brooked no argument. "I'm not going to

do your sum for you tonight, that's final. If I were you I'd think of lessons and not looks. . . . Isn't there anything you want in the world except that?"

"Yes, there is," Tossia said softly.

"What, if it's not a secret?" Vera asked curiously, sitting up.

Tossia closed her eyes and spoke quickly and hotly, the way one speaks of a long-cherished dream.

"Don't laugh, please. More than anything in the world I'd like to have a big brother. . . . My own big brother." She hurried on, afraid they wouldn't let her finish. "We'd have the same surname and everything, a real brother, understand? He'd be older, maybe a couple of years, or better still, five years older. He'd be strong and clever, he'd know everything about life. I'd ask his advice, and tell him things. I'd tell him everything, every little thing! He'd be a real big brother, like other girls have. I'd look after him wonderfully, don't you worry. I'd wash his shirts, I'd buy him fancy neckties out of my pay, I'd cook him three-course dinners every day. We'd go to the pictures together, and in the mornings I'd wake him up and get him off to work. And another thing . . . he wouldn't ever marry, he'd stay with me always. Because if she was a fast, selfish sort, with nothing but clothes on her mind, she'd only make trouble between us. . . . And all louts like Fil would be afraid of him, and he'd look like Dad, a bit anyway. . . ."

Tossia stopped and slowly opened her eyes. Maybe she had really gone too far in her crazy dreams and was really asking too much? Besides, she was afraid the others might laugh at her. But no, no one so much as smiled, and Xan Xanich had a sudden fit of coughing. Tossia's war-crippled childhood as an orphan in a children's home seemed to walk into the room, and all were hushed.

"Hm-m," Xan Xanich uttered. Being the only man there, he felt it was his duty to say something comforting to Tossia. "That's war for you, damn it. . . ."

Nadya tugged at his sleeve and he said no more. Vera's eyes fell before Tossia's searching look. She felt terribly embarrassed, it was as though Tossia, in her childish ignorance, had violated

some unwritten law and had bared her soul to them much more completely than was customary even among people who shared a room and really liked each other.

What shook Vera more than anything else was that Tossia's most daring dreams stopped at a big brother. She must have become so resigned to her orphanhood as a little child that even now it never occurred to her to ask fate for a father and mother, and all she wanted was a big brother who would look a little like her dad.

Squinting in the bright light, Tossia stood in front of Vera's bed, puzzled by the funereal expressions everyone had put on and prepared to give battle to anyone who dared speak disrespectfully of her non-existent big brother.

It suddenly struck Vera that this game little girl did not even know how much life had shortchanged her. She sat up in her bed, jerked the resisting Tossia towards her, crushed her frail shoulders with a bitter-sweet, almost motherly emotion she had never felt before, and buried her chin in the girl's silky hair that smelt so strongly and unbecomingly of Anfissa's exotic perfume.

"You're crazy, let me go," Tossia shrieked, pulling herself free of this unwanted embrace. "You asked and I told you..."

She leapt to a safe distance like a wild little beast and brandished her fists excitedly.

"If you want to wrestle, just say so. I'll show you a trick or two. I had all the boys weeping tears at school!" she boasted.

She intercepted Vera's look—a new, nakedly tender and faintly guilty look—and blinked in confusion.

"Or is it something else?" Suspecting pity, Tossia glared at Vera.

"Silly little fool," Vera said softly, groped for her book and turned away to the wall.

"They all do it," Tossia complained to Xan Xanich. "The minute I don't do things their way, they call me a fool!"

The only thing she could do now was sit down and start scribbling at random in the vain hope that the sum might somehow solve itself.

Nadya and Xan Xanich sat talking quietly. Without stopping scribbling, Tossia took a wary look about her to see if anyone was watching, then quietly thrust a leg out and examined it critically. There was nothing wrong with it that she could see, no matter what Anfissa said.

"There must be a misprint in the answer," Tossia said brightly, comparing the result of her scribbling with the answer.

"Last time you thought it was a misprint too," Vera said in a voice turned hard.

Xan Xanich had other cares to worry him.

"Nadya dear, it's time we began to think of furniture," he was saying. "Supposing we are given a room, and we've nothing ready. I'll make the wardrobe, the table and the chairs myself, they'll be as good as factory-made. I'm keeping my eye on some fine dry wood. But we'd better buy the bed. You know the kind with metal balls on the corners. . . . We'll save up a little money and buy one. . . . What do you say, Nadya dear?"

"All right, let's," Nadya agreed. "This month I'll be able to save about two hundred."

"But you mustn't go without things," Xan Xanich said anxiously. "If you want some sweets, or lipstick or something, go straight ahead, you don't have to ask me."

"Why lipstick?" Nadya said, surprised. "I've no use for lipstick."

"I meant it for example. It might be something else. You're young, you mustn't stint yourself, because before you know it youth will pass."

"Very well, Xan Xanich," Nadya said in a low voice, crushed by his kindness, and stole a look at Vera and Tossia, afraid they might be listening.

Vera was all right: she lay facing the wall, absorbed in her novel. But Tossia was chewing the end of her pencil much too thoughtfully: was she seeking the solution to her unassailable sum, or was she simply clenching her teeth so as not to burst out laughing at Xan Xanich's old man's love?

The moment Vera finished the last page and closed her book, Tossia was there.

"Did they get married?"

Vera nodded.

"I knew it!" Tossia was triumphant. "All novels end in marriage. One's enough, you need read no more. That's why I don't."

"You're too lazy to read, that's why." Vera fluttered her fingers above her head and called out: "I say, Xan Xanich!"

Xan Xanich knew at once what he was expected to do, and said: "Aye, aye, sir!" and swung round to face the wall.

He took a pen-knife out of his pocket and proceeded to stuff back the tow that had oozed out of the seams between the logs. He did this every night so as not to waste the precious minutes it took Vera to undress and settle down for the night. He had already fixed all the seams a man sitting down could reach, and now he was obliged to bend over double to do the lower part.

"You can turn round now, Xan Xanich," Vera called out.

Vera was already in bed, and her dress was draped over the back of a chair. She took a new book from the pile on the bedside table, looked at Katya's bed and then at the clock.

"Katya is certainly having a night out."

"I bet you anything she's sitting on Kamchatka with Sasha at this very minute!" Tossia replied at once.

* * *

Before entering the room, Katya paused for a moment in the corridor and pressed her cool hands to her cheeks that were still burning from Sasha's kisses. Putting on a tired frown, she pushed the door and walked in.

Tossia was still poring over her sum. Xan Xanich had already said good-night to Nadya and gone back to the men's hostel.

"Well?" Tossia cried, jumping up in such eager haste that her stool fell over with a clatter. "Well, Katya?" She picked up the stool, all the while staring at the other girl with burning curiosity in her wide-open eyes.

"What do you mean?" Katya asked pretending not to understand, and held her hands over the warm stove. "How nice and warm!"

"Oh, stop acting!" Tossia cried impatiently. "Does he love you?"

Katya thought for a moment, then nodded, making an inarticulate sound of confirmation, and nodded again for greater certainty.

"Good for us!" Tossia crowed, as happy as if it were herself and not Katya who was the loved one. "Congratulations, Katya!" She hugged Katya impetuously, then pushed her away. "Why, Katya, you simply reek of tobacco! Have you been smoking?"

"No, but Sasha has. . . ."

"Aren't we women fools, though! They smoke and drink stinking moonshine, yet we go and kiss their ugly mugs! When I get my hands on one of those chaps, I'll soon change his ways for him!"

"Did he say just that: 'I love you, I can't live without you'?" she whispered, moving closer to Katya, anxious to learn more about the mysterious workings of love, about which she knew less than nothing.

"Yes, sort of. . . ."

Katya removed a speck of dust from her coat, and hung it up neatly on a coat-hanger. Then, she got her large teacup out of her bedside table, a small linen bag with a bird embroidered on it in which she kept her sugar, and another small bag with nothing embroidered on it in which she kept her biscuits. Tossia watched her in amazement. How could she do all those everyday things and actually think of tea on this night of all nights when Sasha had told her he loved her!

Katya carried her cup of tea to the table and pulled up Anfisa's chair.

"Don't sit on her chair!" Tossia warned her in superstitious fear. "Not hers! Here, take my stool." She leaned close to Katya and looked searchingly into her eyes. "How do you feel right now? D'you feel terribly, terribly big, and so tall you could reach the stars?"

"Oh, leave me alone, will you! What stars, why? Life's sort of more fun, that's all."

Sorely disappointed, Tossia walked away.

"Life's always fun, it's been fun ever since I can remember. True, it does get a bit dull just before payday." Tossia took a sweet out of the paper bag and sucked it thoughtfully. "I say, girls, why do I think of love all the time, ever since I've been here, I mean. Before, you know, I'd remember there was this thing called love no more than once a month or so, and even then only after seeing a picture not allowed for children under sixteen, but now I think of it every single day for no reason at all. It doesn't seem to be a proper place for it, it's so cold, the forest all round, bears and everything, and here am I going on about love. Funny. I wonder why?"

"You've reached the age," said Katya.

"I have?" Tossia looked so dashed as though she had just found out that she had grown old without knowing it. "You mean it happens to everyone? Like an alarm-clock ringing at a set time?"

"Did you think you were the only one?" asked Vera.

"Maybe not the only one, but still. . ."

Tossia was reluctant to accept this simple explanation of her new, exciting mood which she herself did not yet understand very well. There was something humiliating, belittling in this prosy explanation. As if she wasn't a human being at all but just a dumb apple tree or something: the calendar says spring, so burst into flower whether you like it or not.

Katya went to her suitcase, which had a neat canvas cover, and took out something wrapped in pink tissue paper. It was curtain lace, yards of it, which Katya had bought some time ago and without which she could not picture married life.

"Do let Xan Xanich and me have some, sell us a piece, just for one window," Nadya begged.

"I'll need all of it myself," Katya said brusquely, examining the lace with a worried expression.

"Look at them," Tossia said in disgust. "Jabbering about curtain lace. . . . And you call it love! Katya, give me back my brooch. Goodness, when I fall in love I'll grow wings and let them carry me away and away. . . ."

"You are getting carried away right now," said Vera. "What

about your arithmetic? How will you face your teacher? She tries so hard to put some sense into you, and you don't even do your homework, you're always cribbing and making excuses."

"But why should I be ashamed?" Tossia was honestly amazed. "We each of us do what we are supposed to. And besides, she gets paid for it, doesn't she?"

This argument beat Vera.

"Don't you have any pride at all?" she demanded, her patience wearing thin.

"Sure, as much as anyone else."

"Then why can't you do a simple sum? You're a brainy girl otherwise, but here. . . ."

"Who can't do it? Me? Ah, Mummy Vera, how little you understand me!"

Tossia perched on the edge of her stool and attacked her sum with courage. In the meantime, Katya had carefully wrapped and put away her curtain lace, and came back to the table to finish her tea.

"There you are!" Tossia cried jubilantly and slammed her arithmetic book shut.

Vera looked at her suspiciously.

"So soon?"

"Sure thing!"

"Is the answer correct?"

"It is."

"Come on, show me."

"Don't you believe me? And you're supposed to be a friend! Why, I never doubt your word. . . ."

"Just show it to me, will you."

"I'm sick and tired of you picking on me," Tossia exploded. "I'm sick and tired of the lot of you! You're bullies, not friends at all!"

"Careful, Tossia," Nadya said.

"And you too! Because I haven't got a big brother you think you can bully me? I thought I'd be able to breathe freely after the children's home, but no, I'm being ordered about again!" She swung towards Nadya and said spitefully: "Why should you butt

in, I'd like to know? Vera, now, I can understand: she's almost thirty, her man's run away from her, she's no children of her own, so she's-using me as a sort of daughter to try her motherly love on. . . . And you?"

Vera turned away to the wall. Nadya swiftly stepped forward and slapped Tossia's face.

"You spiteful brat! Mind your silly tongue!"

Tossia stood blinking guiltily, all her bluster gone.

"What's wrong with what I said? So I'm not allowed to talk even!" Tossia went up to Vera and straightened her blanket. "Don't be angry. Just forget what I said, Mummy Vera, I didn't mean it, honestly. . . . I'll do that sum, too, blast it! 'The train left the station at so and so', but supposing I want to travel by boat, what do I want the train for?"

Katya burst out laughing.

"And supposing there's no river?"

"Let them dig a canal, it's easy enough. Mummy Vera, are you still mad?"

"Come here, silly, I can't be angry with infants."

"Oh, Vera darling, thank you, you're wonderful!"

Tossia planted a kiss on Vera's shoulder, sat down at the table again and opened her arithmetic book. Clutching her head in her hands she muttered with restrained fury: "The train left the station at 12 a.m. sharp," then glanced up and whispered resentfully: "And not a minute late, blast it!"

First Snow

A single night made the town unrecognisable. The first snowfall lavishly carpeted all the streets, spread warm quilts on the roofs, hung a pretty fringe on the telegraph wires, added festive touches to the big fir tree growing in front of the office, and filled out the sickly saplings to make them look like real trees. The town was flooded with a soft silvery light. In their snow caps the old log houses looked years younger and assumed a fairy-tale grandeur.

The sun had not appeared from behind the forest yet, but it had already spread its rays across the sky high above. Smoke came pouring from all the chimneys. In the still air it rose in pillar-like straightness. From a distance the little town seemed suspended from the sky by thick cables—white with yellowish streaks in the shadow below, and rainbow-coloured higher up in the rays of the sun. A tiny breath of wind, and the coloured cables swayed with one accord. It seemed the town itself was swinging gently back and forth.

All living things left their footprints on the snow. A faint dotted line ran from the hostel to the well: that was Nadya getting up before the others and fetching water. There were the neat little crosses made by a crow and the penny-piece prints of a dog. The crosses and the penny pieces started from opposite directions towards one another, they met and separated in a pattern resembling open scissors. A tractor starting for the forest early that morning had left its mark all down the length of the street: twin ribbons of packed snow, cut by the caterpillars into long, even bricks.

Drowsy with sleep, Tossia came out of the front door and was startled awake by the beauty of the sight. She remained standing on the porch, taking it all in with eyes dazzled by the snow. She scooped up a handful, made it into a ball and rubbed her cheeks with it. It was young snow, fluffy and not cold at all.

"Hey, winter's come!" she shouted at a dog that was running past and threw the snowball at it.

The dog paused, gave Tossia a shocked look, and trotted on on urgent business of its own.

Remembering that she had to collect provisions for her kitchen, Tossia hurried after the dog, careful not to obliterate its footprints. The dog looked back once as if to say: "And who's asking you to come?" With a light, dancing step Tossia went down the street, gazing about at the new-looking town, afraid to miss something worth seeing.

Churkin, the foreman, was clearing the path in front of his house with a broad wooden shovel. A few steps away his youngest boy, Petya, was washing out his inkwell with snow. Bright purple spots coloured the white carpet all around him.

Sasha, wearing only trousers and shoes, was rubbing himself down with snow beside the porch of the men's hostel. One look at him sent a chill down Tossia's spine. She was glad there were such staunch, athletic-minded people living in the world in her time.

The first snow had brought all the youngsters out of doors. They wrestled, squealed, and flopped in the snow like tin soldiers. Tossia gave them one look full of envy and quickly turned away lest she be tempted to join them. The first snowball fight was on, and the first window that winter was broken by a poorly aimed shot.

A fat woman came running out of the house, shouting and brandishing a broom. The boys vanished. The fat woman glared suspiciously at Tossia who, just to be on the safe side, tried to look as grown-up and businesslike as she could.

There was the long-legged caretaker carrying armful after armful of wooden shovels, plastered with last year's mud, from the dark, innermost recesses of the storeroom, shaking his head with distress every time he came across a shovel split in two.

Tossia followed the dog all the way to the canteen, but there their ways parted. The dog took up its post outside the backdoor, where it got titbits now and then, and from there watched Tossia with the look of one too busy to care what this representative of the human race, and by no means the most dignified, would do next.

Tossia made for the front door, saw Ilya on the porch, and felt her hands itch. She quickly made a good, hefty snowball, and threw it, aiming at his fancy cap. The snowball hit him plumb in the ear. With mixed feelings of delight at being such a good shot and horror at what she had done, Tossia turned and ran as fast as her legs would carry her. Ilya overtook her in three huge leaps and started shoving snow down her neck.

"Let go. . . . Ouch, stop it. . . . I won't do it again, I promise. . . ."

At first she honestly tried to break free of Ilya's hold, but she didn't have the strength. And then she shammed a whimper and stealthily cuddled closer to him. Not that she was so terribly attracted to him that she could not resist the temptation, no, it wasn't that at all. It was simply that she had long been dying to find out what sort of feeling it gave a girl to be in a man's arms,

and if it was really as good as the movies made out. True, Ilya had no intention of taking Tossia in his arms, he was simply holding her fast by the scruff of her neck so she wouldn't run away, but that was a mere detail and Tossia dismissed it. And now that she had moved closer and was leaning against him, it looked like the real thing.

There was another reason, and a very good one, why Tossia wanted to make this daring experiment. She had discovered, even before she came here, that she was quite unprepared for such inevitable events in her life as, for instance, someone falling in love with her. And that someone would be nothing like the drunkard Fil or any of his gang, no, he'd be quite a different person whom Tossia could not picture very clearly yet, but she was sure she'd like him too. No one had ever been in love with her, but she was strangely convinced that this thrilling moment was not far off, and what was more, that it was actually approaching at full speed.

Being an inquisitive and observant girl, she did glean some knowledge from the movies, particularly the ones to which poor boys and girls under sixteen were not admitted, but there was something terribly wrong there. All the heroines, even the youngest and the most unsophisticated, always seemed to know how to behave and what to do when a big, beautiful movie love came to them.

In foreign films, the girls bravely threw themselves into their lovers' arms, nestled their heads with the fantastic hairdos against their necks, and forgetting all shame, kissed and kissed and kissed. They did it all so very efficiently that Tossia was sure they must have taken a special course or something. In our movies the girls did those things on a less grand scale, but even then you could see at once that they were no novices and knew what was what only too well. They'd obviously gone through the same useful course of training as the foreign stars, though not so full perhaps, —anyway, some sort of concise course they'd certainly had.

And the way things looked, even Katya and Sasha were managing as well as any movie lovers. Tossia was really perturbed by the fact that she alone knew nothing. She was afraid she'd make a terribly poor show if she had to face the problem suddenly, before she was prepared. And being a far-sighted person, she made up her

mind to miss no chance of getting a bit of practice, so as not to fail too dismally when her turn came to nestle against someone's chest, lock her hands behind someone's neck and even kiss, perhaps.

Tossia had no illusions about herself, and never for a moment hoped Ilya would fall in love with her; for training purposes, however, he'd do quite well, none better. Besides, this was such a wonderful and perfectly safe chance, it would be a shame to miss it. And so Tossia quickly decided to use Ilya as a sort of dummy with which to rehearse her future behaviour with her unknown lover who was wasting his time somewhere, in no apparent hurry to come and claim her. . . .

To be quite frank, she had one other reason, not a reason exactly, but rather a spiteful little thought: "He refuses to notice me, he can't even remember my name and keeps calling me Dussia. Very well, then, I'll just make use of him, the dolt."

Still pretending she was struggling against him, Tossia stood on tiptoe and shutting her eyes tight from fear poked her head under his arm. She did not stir or breathe for she was on the threshold of great discoveries.

A suffocating smell of benzine and a fainter smell of tar came from Ilya's padded jacket. These ordinary, everyday smells would not let Tossia concentrate to decide whether she was experiencing some new, womanly feeling, or whether that longed-for grown-up bliss was passing her by again, even given this great chance.

Ilya stopped stuffing snow down her neck, and asked her mockingly:

"Hey, cook, are you taking a snooze or something?"

That made Tossia spring away from him before she had time to decide whether it had been good to be under his arm or just so-so. In the meantime the snow began to melt down her neck, and that at least wanted no deciding whether it was good or not.

"Let go, you hear!" she said angrily.

Naturally, Ilya had no idea about Tossia's secret intentions, and so her timid burrowing under his arm surprised him no end.

"Why, Tossia, I believe you've fallen for me!"

There goes your practice, you stupid inquisitive fool! Tossia

vehemently shook her head to convince Ilya how wrong he was, how ridiculous was his very suggestion. Seeing that he more than doubted her sincerity, she became furious, angrier than she had ever been with anyone in her life.

"Let go, leave me alone!" Hating him, she pushed his heavy hand off her shoulder, and marched off—a small, stiff tin soldier.

Her stride was unhurried and dignified, it took some self-control not to run like a kid. Absently she noticed the mongrel again: it was busy with its honestly earned bone and no longer interested in Tossia's doings. With the nerves in her back she felt Ilya's eyes upon her, and that made her thrust her pointed chin higher and higher. What else could she do? What would Ilya think of her now? Heaven alone knew. What a mess. . . . She swung her right arm as fast and hard as it would go, while her left hung limp and nerveless.

Ilya stood and stared. He simply could not make her out. He was so used to regarding Tossia as a mere kid with a child's emotions, that he could not change his mind about her at the drop of a hat. And even though he had caught her snuggling up to him, caught her in the act so to say, he still could not believe she was seriously in love with him. It was a childish crush more likely. Not that he had any use for Tossia's calf love, and yet being only human it flattered Ilya that the funny kid should have chosen him of all the fellows there to fall in love with.

* * *

The office was not left unmoved by the first snow either. The lumber camp found itself in its winter season overnight, and as usual winter caught everyone unawares. A couple of days would have made all the difference, they'd have been properly prepared then.

Ignat Vasilyevich, the chief, saw nothing romantic or beautiful in the first snow; to him it was an elemental calamity that made his job even more difficult and troublesome than it was already.

Since early morning he had been talking himself hoarse on the phone in an effort to explain to his superiors exactly why the night shift had delivered less timber than planned.

The small hinged pane in the window was open, and his hopeless explanations to his faraway and hard-hearted superiors were broadcast for all the street to hear.

"Snowdrifts . . . don't you understand? That's why the drop. . . The road's covered over, take a look out of your window, it's not in the papers in front of you, it's outside. . . . The snowplough, you say? It's being repaired. . . . I'm telling you in plain Russian: snowdrifts. . . . Oh, damn you. . . ."

The first snow!

The Bet

Once again there was dancing in the club, and once again Tossia was a wall-flower. The couples dancing in the middle of the room looked so bored, it seemed more like drudgery to them than fun. Katya and Sasha alone were a pleasure to watch. Love had certainly done wonders to the clumsy fellow. he stepped on Katya's toes no more than three times during a whole dance.

As the learned Vera had once explained to Tossia, the cultural superstructure still fell short of the material basis in the forest community, and little had changed here since the night Tossia had her tiff with the drunken Fil. As usual there were girls no one asked to dance languishing by "their" wall, as usual Fil's gang roared at their private jokes, the dominoes addicts slammed down their pieces, never losing hope they'd one day smash the heavy table top, and as usual the plump girl with the large ear-rings did her record changing duty. The only new thing was Vera's portrait beside Ilya's, and a better job it was too. Also, the pile of overcoats in the corner near the door was twice as big, the surest sign that winter had come to stay.

Fil left his gang and took a stroll up and down the room, a cigarette dangling from his lip.

"Poor Tossia, what's happened to your boy friends?" he asked Tossia with feigned sympathy as if they were good pals.

"Push on," Tossia said coldly.

Fil blew some smoke into her face and turned to ask the girl with the ear-rings for a dance, to make Tossia realise what she was missing.

Truly, where were her boy friends? Tossia stole a quick look at Ilya playing draughts in the far corner of the room. He wore his deerskin cap tilted over his left ear, the one she had hit with a snowball, Tossia remembered. For reasons of his own he wasn't dancing that night, he had not even taken off his coat and looked as if he had only dropped in for a moment.

After that unfortunate training session on the first day of snow, Tossia thought her life wouldn't be worth living. She was sure that Ilya, like all good-looking fellows, would immediately start bragging about his new conquest, and that Fil, the snake, would quickly seize this wonderful chance to settle his score with her. But time went on, and though Fil was horrid to her both at work and at night school,—once he actually put a frog in her desk!—he made no allusions at all to that wretched episode. Which all meant that Ilya had told his best friend nothing.

Frankly, Tossia had never expected Ilya to be so chivalrous. She felt ashamed of her shabby thoughts, as she always did when people proved better than she thought them to be at first. She meant to do him a good turn by way of thanks as soon as she could. But the November holidays were already long past, winter had come into its own, heavy tractors could safely cross the frozen river now, the unfinished house where Nadya and Xan Xanich were to be given a room became snowed under on a level with by-road drifts, there was talk that someone had already seen the Northern Lights one night when Tossia lay sound asleep in her lumpy, hard bed, the New Year was almost in, and still she could not find a chance to repay Ilya for his kindness.

If only Ilya would leave his silly game, take off his coat and ask her for a dance, she'd know how to thank him. For a moment she pictured herself dancing with him: everyone would be watching them, the girls would be green with envy, and she and Ilya would go waltzing round and round, raising a warm little wind. . . . She believed they'd dance well together, they'd make

wonderful partners, not as handsome perhaps as Ilya and Anfissa but better than Katya and Sasha anyway.

"Why doesn't he ask me?" Tossia thought longingly, her eyes on Ilya. *"If I were him I most certainly would. Surely it can't be more fun chasing those silly bits of wood over the chess-board than dancing with me?"*

She would have gone up and asked him herself if she could have been sure of Ilya's taking it in the right spirit. But she could not be sure, she was rather afraid Ilya would think she was chasing him, and so she remained standing where she was, guarding Ilya's and Vera's portraits on the wall, and pretending she was not dying to dance at all.

Fil abandoned the girl with the ear-rings in the middle of the floor, and idly strolled up to Ilya and the caretaker who were playing draughts with chessmen. Ilya looked so bored, he could not even bother to light his cigarette which had long gone out.

"What a swell cap you've got!" Fil said enviously for perhaps the hundredth time. With the familiarity of an old friend, he took it off Ilya's head, tried it on, and reluctantly returned it to its owner, carefully tilting it over the left ear exactly the way it had been. "Look, sell it to me, or let's swap caps. I'll pay you any difference you say."

Ilya waved him away, advanced his pawn to King and replaced it with the King piece.

"Why aren't you dancing?" Fil asked.

"Who with?" Ilya said yawning. "Anfissa's on duty, and the others. . . ."

He pointed the King at the wall-flowers with eloquent disdain. Fil glanced at Tossia, and suddenly a malicious light flared up in his eyes.

"Not all of them! Have you tried dancing with the cook, Tossia?"

Ilya made a grimace.

"Oh, that's kindergarten stuff!"

"I don't know. . . . Back in Voronezh she carried away some prizes for ball-room dancing," Fil lied with great feeling, to make Tossia appear more desirable.

"She did?" Ilya was surprised.

"Didn't you know? I saw it in the paper with my own eyes, only I don't suppose she'll dance with you," Fil egged his friend on.

Ilya remembered Tossia snuggling under his arm on the day the first snow fell, and gave Fil a condescending smile, graciously forgiving him his ignorance.

"She's game all right," Fil went on admiringly. "Have you noticed she won't dance with anyone here, she says we're not good enough for her. We're clumsy bears, she says."

Ilya no longer looked bored.

"We'll have another game later," he said to the caretaker, swept the pieces together, and got to his feet.

Fil glanced at Tossia who little suspected there was a plot being hatched against her. Ilya lighted his cigarette from Fil's.

"Hey, cook!" Ilya called out across the room, and crooking his finger, beckoned to Tossia, as though she were a fish he had caught and was tugging towards him.

Tossia swayed obediently towards him, and the next moment shrank back. So that's how really chivalrous he was! The thing was that being so plain and small she simply did not exist for Ilya. And the reason why he had not told Fil anything was because the episode had left no impression on him. And she, the kind-hearted idiot, had ascribed it to chivalry which he had never had.

Ilya frowned at her lack of alacrity and imperiously beckoned with his finger again to make it clear to the slow-witted girl that he wanted to dance with her. And even now he looked past Tossia, as though she wasn't there. Obviously he never doubted for a moment that she would come running to him like a faithful little dog, highly flattered by his attention. Tossia gasped at the insult of it. She could not utter a sound, she knew she'd start stuttering if she tried to say something to the wretch.

"The beast! All right, I'll teach you how not to notice people," she thought vengefully.

The girl with the ear-rings gave Tossia a shove.

"Go on, Ilya himself is asking you!"

Tossia shrugged off this uninvited counsellor, crooked her finger, carefully aimed it at Ilya and beckoned to him. He straightened

his famous deerskin cap and strode unhurriedly across the room to her. The girl with the ear-rings blinked in fright and closed both eyes tight.

"You've guts all right," Ilya said to Tossia approvingly, amused rather than annoyed by her resistance, and looked with kindly curiosity at the funny kid who dared caricature his gesture.

The girl with the ear-rings opened one eye. Ilya had stopped a few feet away from Tossia and again, more insistently now, beckoned her with his crooked finger and then with his whole hand. Tossing her head proudly, with resolve born of despair, Tossia took a step forward and beckoned too. Ilya watched her, puzzled but not put out. He could not understand her game at all; why this resistance, when everything would be the way he wanted it anyway.

"Don't you know when you're lucky?" the girl with the ear-rings said in a shocked voice, currying favour with Ilya. "Go on, what's the matter with you?"

Sasha, the good soul, wanted to come to Tossia's rescue, sensing that something was wrong, but Katya hung on to his arm and would not let him go. All the dancers crowded together and stood watching the silent duel. The din in the room died down, and now the music sounded much louder. The dominoes players alone remained oblivious of their surroundings, and slammed their pieces down as happily as ever.

Ilya came right up to Tossia and placed his hand on her shoulder to force the stubborn girl to dance with him. Tossia stiffened and brushed it off.

"D-do you always d-dance with a cigarette in your m-mouth?" she stuttered.

The girl with the ear-rings gasped and sidled away from Tossia to a safe distance. The slamming of domino pieces ceased. Now the music sounded even louder, blaring forth with gay abandon.

To everyone's surprise, Ilya gave a grin, obediently stubbed out his cigarette on the sole of his shoe, threw the butt away, and bent forward to put an arm round Tossia. She motioned him to stop.

"T-take your c-coat off f-first, it's d-dusty."

Katya giggled, feeling safe beside Sasha, and the other girls smiled too. The men remained sullen and silent, united by their male vanity.

His patience wearing thin, Ilya took off his coat and threw it to Fil. Next, forestalling Tossia's next demand, he tossed away his deerskin cap, zipped up his jacket to the very collar, ran his fingers through his hair and, certain that Tossia could find no fault with him now, held out an inviting hand.

"Well!" Tossia announced triumphantly to the lumberjacks crowding round her and Ilya. Raising herself on tiptoe, she beckoned with a crooked finger, waving it right in front of Ilya's nose, and said: "I don't dance with people who do this. Understand?"

The girl with the ear-rings stared at Tossia, appalled by such behaviour. Katya giggled in approval, and the other girls laughed too, glad that Tossia had paid Ilya back for all of them. The men exchanged troubled glances, afraid that Ilya might disgrace their entire male breed. Puzzled by this turn of events, Fil stood shaking his head and absently plucking at the fur of Ilya's dream of a cap. The girl with the ear-rings now opened both eyes wide and laughed louder than the rest, making up for all the past years and hardly believing her own audacity.

Staring hard at Tossia, as though he wanted to memorise her face thoroughly, Ilya threw out a languid arm in the direction of the girl with the ear-rings, inviting her to dance. Frightened, she stopped laughing and with customary obedience made a step towards Ilya, but a glance at Tossia the Conqueror made her change her mind, and to everyone's surprise she shifted her bulk close to her, seeking protection under the wing of the frail little girl.

Everyone burst out laughing now, both the girls and the men. Even the worst larrikins in Fil's gang, deciding it was best not to oppose the majority, smiled crookedly and sniggered, betraying their friend Ilya. The curious came running from all over the club, drawn by the general merriment.

Ilya glared at Tossia. All his condescending kindness was gone.

"Never mind, I'll settle with you later," he muttered, shaking his fist, and rushed towards the door, pushing his way through the crowd.

Tossia grabbed the girl with the ear-rings and danced away with her. The girl meekly followed Tossia's steps, switching her stunned look from this plain little conqueror to the handsome Ilya who was fleeing so ignominiously.

"Attaboy, Tossia," Katya said, quite forgetting that only a few minutes ago she had not let Sasha go to her rescue. "If only everyone acted like you did, but our girls have no pride at all. . . . Right, Sasha?"

Sasha shuffled his feet, thought for a minute and then made an inarticulate sound of agreement.

Fil caught up with Ilya at the door, put his deerskin cap on his friend's head and threw his coat over his shoulders.

"Imagine making such a sucker of you, of all people!" Fil said consolingly, and added: "You'd never think she had it in her!"

"To hell with her!" Ilya snapped. "She's just playing hard to get."

"Maybe she is, but then there are such spunky girls, you know. Nothing to look at, but there's no making them. Now, we had a case at the collective farm. . . ."

"Spunky or not, they're all made of the same stuff. I'll whistle and they'll come running," Ilya broke in, pulling on his coat.

"Why didn't you whistle to Tossia then?" Fil asked reasonably enough.

"I couldn't be bothered," Ilya muttered. "Let's go and have a drink, I'm sick of these dances."

They started across the foyer to the front door.

"Still, you won't make her," Fil said insinuatingly with a glance at the coveted deerskin cap.

"Won't I? Want to bet?" Ilya said, turning sharply.

Hardly daring to believe his luck, Fil indicated the cap with a look, both hesitant and hopeful.

"All right," Ilya agreed. "My deerskin against your astrakhan."

"You'll take her to Kamchatka too?"

"She'll come running herself," Ilya assured him.

Fil smirked, and with the look of a gambler shook Ilya's hand. Just then Anfissa came in from the street.

"Seal this bet, Anfissa. You always bring luck," Fil said to her.

Anfissa shrugged indifferently and separated their hands, asking no questions.

"We haven't said how long you can take," Fil remembered.

"We'll settle that later, I don't intend to take long," Ilya said. Before leaving the club, Ilya looked into the dance hall once again, as if to make sure he hadn't imagined it. Tossia was standing under his portrait as usual, and round her flocked all the smartest fellows in the town, begging dances. Tossia looked embarrassed and happy, glancing about her with shining eyes, not knowing whose invitation to accept first.

Ilya snorted in disdain and strode to the door. Fil hurried after him. The crooner sang out after them:

*When the music starts to play,
You're the first to dance away. . .*

Ilya Launches His Attack. Tossia Is Warned

Tossia was busy cooking in the kitchen shed that had been hastily adapted for the winter. She hummed a song as people who are accustomed to working in solitude are wont to do, hardly thinking of the words.

She felt quite at home in her new job, she was used to being praised for her cooking by all except Fil, and was actually a bit bored with her success. Her movements were efficient and deliberate, not unlike Xan Xanich's when he was making something. And yet Tossia was still a child and sometimes she seemed to be playing at cooking, making a make-believe meal for her dolls rather than for a crowd of ravenous lumberjacks.

Ilya emerged from the forest, put down his wonder saw on a tree stump, and strolled down the path trodden in the snow towards the kitchen. Tossia turned her back to the door, placed

the heaviest ladle beside her in case of emergency, and hummed louder.

Just so she wouldn't think he was in such a tearing hurry to make up for last night, Ilya paused in front of the wood-fire, picked up a greyish smouldering brand, lighted his cigarette, stared up at the glassy sun for a moment, and only then walked into the kitched shed.

"Give me some soda water from the stream, will you," he asked her in the slightly offhand manner he always used with girls.

Tossia glanced at the pail of water covered with a film of ice and felt she couldn't offer him that on such a cold day.

"I've some boiled water," she said brusquely, annoyed with herself for worrying about his throat.

"I don't use the stuff," Ilya replied.

Never letting the heavy ladle out of her sight, Tossia took a tin mug off its nail, scalded it, and proceeded to wipe it with the cleanest towel she had, to let Ilya see that whatever her personal feelings, she was at work, where hygiene came first. Ilya watched her operations with curiosity. It suddenly occurred to Tossia that he might misunderstand her motives, and so she hurried to explain: "It's so you don't swallow a germ."

"Nothing so small would worry me," Ilya scoffed.

Tossia wondered if there was a hidden meaning in this, an allusion to her unfortunate size, but then there was no telling with a person like Ilya. She broke the film of ice with the bottom of the mug, scooped up some water and handed it to him.

"How d'you like it here, the job not too hard?" Ilya asked with awkward solicitude and took a step towards her.

Frightened, she made a grab for her ladle and felt safe at once. Ilya saw her movement and went straight to the point.

"So you swallowed it hook, line and sinker last night, didn't you?"

"Swallowed what?" Tossia asked, puzzled, and lowered the ladle.

"Why, did you think I'd seriously ask you to dance like this?"

Ilya crooked his finger and beckoned.

Tossia blinked in dismay. She had to change her opinion of him once again, there was no understanding anything. What sort of person was he really? She looked at him and quickly dropped

her eyes, embarrassed by the honest and calm expression in his. What was she to do now? She would have liked to believe Ilya, but she could not quite. And yet why should he lie to her and pretend? Perhaps he was trying to make amends for his rudeness? But then again, why make amends if she meant nothing to him? What a character, all mixed up himself and getting others mixed up too.

The ladle was too heavy to hold long. Tossia hung the useless weapon on its nail, and, as she did so, noticed that a new film of ice was beginning to form on the water in the pail.

"Then why did you do that?" she asked, imitating Ilya's gesture.

"It's one of our rules," Ilya replied in his most candid tone. "We give all the new girls a test to see what they're worth, understand? It was your turn last night. We should have done it sooner, you must forgive us. . . ."

She had to forgive them for the delay! The nerve!

"Well, what am I worth?" Tossia asked, her curiosity roused.

"A good deal more than the others," Ilya assured her. He would have pressed his right hand to his heart to make it more convincing, but the mug got in the way. "Very few girls pass but you did!"

In spite of herself Tossia smiled, feeling flattered.

"D'you think I believe that?" she said, frowning hastily, but the lilt in her voice belied her expression.

"Please yourself," Ilya said in a tone of misunderstood and injured innocence, and took a sip of water.

"The thing you'll say next is that Fil likes my cooking."

"And how! He put on four pounds."

"Why did he say that the soup was nothing to write home about?"

"You haven't forgotten?" Ilya said, smiling.

"I always bear criticism in mind, even if it's silly," she said with dignity.

"All good workers do that," Ilya said. "Look, Tossia, throw all that stuff out of your head," he made a sweeping gesture with his free hand. "Everything is going to be different from now on be-

cause you're such a good sport. If anyone hurts you, just give me the word and I'll fix him up. All right?"

Should she begin by telling him about Fil? Her inborn hatred of sneaks, however, prevented her from uttering a word, and she just nodded.

He gave a sigh of relief, and squeezed Tossia's sharp elbow to seal the first advantage gained. Then he manfully gulped down the water, took a breath, and crunched all the bits of ice.

"The water's good," Ilya said, gave the stunned Tossia a friendly wink to remind her of their agreement, and strode off towards the forest with the air of a man who has done his duty and has therefore the right to be pleased with himself and with life in general.

Tossia watched him go until the trees swallowed him up, and then, woman that she was, rushed to the pail, broke the film of ice and studied her reflection in the water, tucking in a strand of hair and straightening her boyish fur cap.

Katya, the busybody, stole up to the shed.

"You be careful," she warned the younger girl. "If I were you I'd give Ilya a wide berth."

"What's wrong with him?" Tossia asked worriedly.

"If he gets into your system, you'll never get him out again. He's having an affair with Anfissa, and he's a proper wolf. . . ."

"A what?"

"A woman chaser, that's what."

"He is? I haven't noticed. . . ."

"It'll be too late when you do notice. Has he asked you to the pictures yet?"

Tossia shook her head.

"He will, we know his line. You'll be an idiot if you fall for it."

"Idiot yourself," Tossia snapped, furious with Katya for interfering. The busybody! She could still feel Ilya's fingers of steel squeezing her elbow, and yet she was expected to change her mind about him once again! What a mess!

"You listen to your elders, my girl," said Katya and departed in a huff.

* * *

...Ilya talked Sasha and two other chaps into helping Tossia, and so they each brought an armful of dry, pitchy firewood when they came for their midday meal. The girls murmured in disapproval: "Why help the cook, even if the cook is as good as Tossia?" The men marched up to the stove and at a signal from Ilya dropped the wood at Tossia's feet, making a pile that almost hid her from sight.

"My, what a lot!" she crowed like a happy child. "Thanks, boys, isn't it nice of you!"

"It's a small thing," Ilya said carelessly.

It suddenly came back to Tossia that right at the beginning, when she was feeling lost and frightened, it was Ilya who first gave her cooking its due, after which the other lumbermen, taking his cue, began to praise it too. Her old, slightly time-worn gratitude again snaked its way into her heart.

Quick to mete out judgement, Tossia gave Katya some watery soup for telling tales about a decent person, and the best of it to Sasha and the other two volunteers.

Ilya was the last to come up. Tossia stirred the soup for a long time with her ladle, afraid to look into his eyes and be disappointed in him again. He waited patiently and humbly, holding out his empty bowl. The girls began to giggle. And then Tossia raised her head quickly and looked into Ilya's clear and smiling eyes.

"By the way, there's a picture show at the club tonight," he said softly.

Tossia dashed the soup into his bowl and stood poised, ready to snub him if he tried his wolf tactics.

"So what?" she asked warily.

Tossia clutched the ladle so hard that her nails turned white. Ilya could not exactly explain why, but he suddenly had a feeling of imminent danger as though he were walking on a flimsy board thrown across a torrent raging far below, and one false step would be the end of him. . . . On a sudden impulse he decided not to ask Tossia to the pictures.

"Nothing. . . . They say it's in colour," he said casually and walked away.

As usual, the lumberjacks made room for him at the table. Tossia, busy serving the dinner, watched the unfathomable Ilya from the corner of her eye. He had the peaceful and perfectly trustworthy look of a man enjoying his meal. She saw him move up the bread basket nearer and look for a loaf end. There wasn't one there. "That's because he chopped the wood for me and came late," she thought remorsefully. She leaned back against the woodpile, utterly worn out by her confused thoughts and emotions.

In the meantime Ilya was eating Tossia's famous soup with obvious enjoyment, and there was nothing in him to show that he was a despicable wolf and a danger to her. He leaned closer to Xan Xanich and said just loud enough for Tossia to hear:

"I've never eaten anything so good before!"

"Sure, our Tossia is the Queen of Cooks," Xan Xanich readily agreed.

"Hear, hear!" Fil said. For some reason he took off his astrakhan cap, fanned himself with it, blew and puffed.

Tossia sensed a hidden meaning in his tone and gesture, but she had neither the energy nor the inclination to puzzle it out. The whole thing was too much for her.

"Who wants a second helping?" she mumbled miserably.

Shadows on the Floor

Anfissa was on night duty in the telephone room. To while away the time she thumbed through some old newspapers, only stopping to read about the divorce cases. The telephone rang loudly in the stillness. She picked up the receiver.

"Hello," she said in her dry professional voice. "What's the hurry, you can't chop down all the forest anyway." Holding the receiver between her shoulder and cheek, she reached for a pencil to take down the message. "Slowcoach yourself," she snapped with habitual rudeness. "All right, read it out."

Her duty done, she opened the desk drawer and got out the looking glass kept there—a broken piece shaped rather like Africa. Someone had left it there years ago, before the war perhaps, and all the telephone girls had been using it ever since. Anfissa wondered sometimes what its owner had been like. Her career had been as checkered as her own perhaps. Where was she now, what was she doing? . . .

Anfissa fluffed up her hair, pulled down her sweater, picked up the paper again only to push it away at once. She was sick and tired of everything: answering the telephone, reading the divorce announcements, looking at herself in the mirror all the time, and even admiring her universally recognised beauty.

The door gave a furtive squeak and Ilya slipped in.

"Oh, it's you, darling," Anfissa said with a smile. "I was beginning to think you had fallen out of love with me. . . ."

Without a word and as casually as though he belonged there, Ilya took off his new leather overcoat, hung it on the nail he always used, produced a box of sweets from his pocket and placed it on the table before Anfissa. With a languid gesture she stretched and pulled the short curtain across the window. Wasting no time, Ilya drew her to him.

They stood in the glaring light of the unshaded lamp overhead. Ilya had been there often enough, but only now it struck him how black their shadows were on the floor.

The door swung open, and in walked Nadya. Ilya sprang away, but too late.

"You ought to lock the door," Nadya said glumly.

"We've nothing to hide!" Anfissa said with a challenge.

"Don't pretend to me, at least."

Nadya pulled out the bottom drawer of the desk, took the socks she was knitting for Xan Xanich in her spare moments, and left the room without so much as a glance at Ilya, who may not have been there at all as far as she was concerned.

"Don't be afraid. She won't tell anyone. A secret's safe with her," Anfissa said to him.

"What do I care? Mud doesn't stick to a man. It's you girls who have to be careful."

"Too true," Anfissa agreed. "You've beaten us in this also. Oh, never mind, there's so much mud stuck to me already that another ton won't make much difference."

"Why do you make yourself out to be worse than you are?" Ilya asked with annoyance, moving away from her.

"To spite myself," Anfissa answered defiantly. "Life's more fun that way."

"Is it? Even when you're making love you're as cool as though you were doing some turn on the programme. As if you're sick to hell of everything. . . ."

"Heavens, aren't you getting fussy!" Anfissa tried to laugh it off.

"Sure, you're always fun at a party. Everyone stares and envies me. . . . But when we're alone, we have hardly anything to say. For God's sake why?"

"I don't know," Anfissa replied gloomily. "Why this high-minded discussion in the middle of the night?"

The ringing of the telephone came as a godsend to her. She picked up the receiver and nodded to Ilya, indicating the message book. With the quickness acquired through long experience, Ilya handed her the book, opened at the right page, and a pen.

While she wrote, he watched her over her shoulder. An onlooker would have taken him for a carping dispatcher, checking to see how one of his subordinates was doing her job. Ilya gave the telephone a baleful glance, and walked away.

Idly, as he paced the room, he watched his shadow now stretching, now shrinking, now darting across the floor, now creeping up the wall, now clinging grotesquely to the side of the whitewashed stove. It repeated all his motions and yet they appeared ugly and ridiculous. The shadow seemed to live a life of its own, independent of him, and was whimsically aping his motions to tease him.

"You know, when I first met you I thought I wouldn't mind marrying a girl as beautiful as you. And now . . ." Ilya said when Anfissa had finished.

"Men don't marry women like me, Ilya darling." She said it

flatly, as if the thing had been settled ages ago. "We're good enough for a love affair, but it's others that men marry, girls with better morals. . . . All right, Ilya dear, the quiz session is over. Don't be so indiscreet. I ask you no questions, you know."

The telephone rang.

"Damn the thing, always at the wrong moment!" Ilya swore and angrily snatched up the receiver. "Hello. What engineer Dementiev? Never heard of you." He turned to Anfissa. "I say, what does he want?"

"Why don't you ask him?" Anfissa suggested.

"Look, comrade Dementiev, why don't you go to bed and let others get some sleep, it's late, you know. . . . All right, don't yell, we don't scare easily here." He handed the receiver to Anfissa and said: "He's kicking up a row about something or other."

Anfissa listened.

"Business at the trust is keeping you?" she repeated nonchalantly. "Let it keep you, for all I care. A what? Loafer yourself!" She hung up and turned to Ilya. "Hell, d'you know who it was? Our new engineer, he'll be here soon."

"Pity we spoke to him like that," Ilya said regretfully. "I hope it doesn't land you in trouble."

"I'll get out of it somehow," she dismissed the matter, and suddenly remembering something, looked mockingly at Ilya and said: "Are you seriously chasing Tossia? I'd never have expected it of you. You and Tossia. What a couple!"

Ilya made a gesture of annoyance with his hand. And his shadow on the wall aped him.

"Fil and I had a bet," he explained reluctantly. "You sealed it yourself, remember?"

"Oh, so that's what it was about! You needn't have bet, I think she has a crush on you already. Flying high, isn't she!"

"So much the better," Ilya muttered and looked away. Anfissa studied him curiously.

"And the silly fool is probably dreaming and hoping! She's a thorn in my side, you know. We clash in everything, she lives one way and I live another."

"Why are you and Fil so dead set against her? You're taking her too seriously, she's a kid like any other except that she has a ready tongue, good for a chat when you're bored. As for all that other stuff, she's too green yet, a sapling. . . ."

"You sound like a big, loving brother!" Anfissa said in some surprise. "Why did you make the bet then?"

"It sort of happened, it bothers me too. . . ."

"Why, I think you're ashamed of yourself!" Anfissa's tone was accusing.

"If only she were a little older."

"She certainly is raw," Anfissa said.

"I wouldn't call her raw," Ilya stood up in Tossia's defence. "She's not stupid either, only she's still got the mentality of a Young Pioneer, a fifth former."

"What profound thinking!" Anfissa sneered.

"You're not jealous, are you?"

"I'd love to be but I don't know how. It's just that I never thought you'd give me up for someone like her."

"But I haven't! Why, only a blind fool would give you up for that undersized kid!"

"Now that's talking!" Anfissa approved. "She's cheeky too! Do give her a good lesson."

"I've found the right approach," Ilya said boastfully, moving closer to Anfissa. "I praise her cooking to the skies and she laps it all up. It's funny how little it takes. I'll make the final check-up tomorrow and then it's time to end the whole thing. Won't she be mad when she finds out about the bet! Never mind, it's her own fault, she shouldn't have put on that act in the club. She'll have more sense in future."

"Aren't we a couple of rotters though," said Anfissa.

"It's the life here," Ilya said defensively. "I used to think the main thing was to do a good job of work and the rest would take care of itself. Like hell it will! They hang my picture on the wall and everything, and what's the good? There's a part of me left unoccupied, if you know what I mean."

"You're breaking my heart!" she said with make-believe grief, and then suggested to Ilya with a smile: "Join the string orchestra,

what's wrong with that for an occupation? If die we must, let there be music!"

"I'm talking seriously, and you. . . ."

"I don't talk seriously after 10 p.m., darling," Anfissa said. "You'd better take your Tossia and listen to a lecture on love and friendship at the club."

"You *are* jealous."

Anfissa shrugged.

"All right, if you want to think so."

The telephone rang.

"You're through," Anfissa said into the phone and indicated to Ilya with a nod what number she wanted plugged in. He was so quick and efficient that Anfissa had to praise him for it.

They looked at one another and burst out laughing.

"That's the way I like you best!" Ilya said happily, glad their bickering was over.

He was not sure if he ought to make love to her right away after what had been said, and besides he had the uncanny feeling that Tossia was watching them. He chased away this fantastic notion, and drew her to him.

"Don't," she said, trying to frown.

"You're the most beautiful girl I've ever known!"

"You and your compliments! Have you found the right approach for me too?" Anfissa's tone was mocking, but her eyes glowed softly.

Ilya opened the box of sweets.

"Have one, they're your favourite ones."

The telephone rang again. Anfissa held the receiver close to Ilya's ear and he heard the rheumatic rumble on the other end of the wire quite clearly.

"How is your plan going?"

"Oh, we're overfulfilling it!" Anfissa said playfully, taking a sweet and pressing closer to Ilya.

"A hell of a time to talk of plans," Ilya said gruffly, placed the receiver back on its rest, and resolutely sought Anfissa's mouth.

Ilya forgot all about their shadows, but they went on living their imitation of life. On the floor, his shadow joined hers, and where their lips met there was a crushed cigarette end on the dirty sheet of iron in front of the stove.

The Final Check-Up

Tossia was busy ladling soup into the bowls of the waiting lumberjacks, but she kept her eyes open for Ilya who was neither in the queue nor at the table. When she had served the last man, she began to worry.

"Where's that front-ranker of ours?" she asked Churkin.

"Over there," Churkin made a vague gesture in the direction of the forest. "He wouldn't come. Our front-ranker's making money. They're greedy for money, front-rankers are."

Above the clatter of spoons Tossia heard the distant rumble of a falling tree. She quickly poured some soup into an army kettle, filled the lid with buckwheat porridge, wrapped the crustiest loaf end into a clean towel, and with the grave and forbidding air of a person carrying out his duty, bravely started for the forest. As at a signal all the girls turned their heads to look, and a little murmur of disapproval ran round the table. What a bunch of busybodies!

Katya ran after her.

"Where are you off to?" she demanded like a prosecutor, eyeing the streaming kettle.

"Nowhere in particular. . . . Not everybody came to eat. . . . They've urgent work. . . ." Tossia swung the kettle in the direction of the forest.

"Urgent work!" Katya mocked. "Something tells me you'll have urgent work at Kamchatka before long."

"So what? I'm not a minor, thank God," Tossia was up in arms at once.

Katya shook her head reproachfully, and then proceeded to explain things to Tossia with the righteousness of a person who has never made a mistake in his life.

"A girl may go to Kamchatka with one man only. One man understand?" Katya held up one finger to make it clearer. "Look before you leap, so to say. Like I did with Sasha, ours is a good example for you to follow."

Katya gazed tenderly at the finger which just then represented her beloved Sasha. "Or else," she stuck out her middle, bandaged, finger and then all the others, one by one. "Or else, you'll end up like Anfissa. Is that what you're after?"

Tossia shook her head vigorously. Pleased with her for listening to the sermon so humbly, Katya relented and gave her a shove towards the trees.

"Make it snappy now! Stick to me and you'll be all right."

Tossia nodded gratefully and started along the track at a run.

She found Ilya all alone, felling one tree after another with his wonder saw.

"Why don't you come and eat?" she demanded sternly, holding the kettle behind her back.

"No time," Ilya muttered, stealthily watching Tossia, and thinking: so she has come running. "It's the end of the year, and where's our plan fulfilment?"

"Oh, I see," Tossia said, duly impressed. "Still, even if you are a front-ranker and have your portrait in the club, you've got to eat, plan or no plan."

Tossia hastily spread the towel in which she had wrapped the bread over a stump, and in the tone of a good hostess invited Ilya to eat.

Ilya glanced at the dinner with the disgruntled expression of a person whose work had been interfered with, and then found he could not tear his fascinated gaze from the steaming kettle.

"What have you got there?" he asked carpingly.

"Cabbage soup."

"Cabbage soup, day in day out," he grumbled, refusing to give in so quickly. With an effort he looked away from the kettle, gulped and, in spite of himself, asked: "With meat?"

"Sure. . . . Come on, eat it while it's hot, your plan won't suffer for it," Tossia insisted. "Nice friends you've got, leaving you in the forest while they sit and eat in comfort."

Ilya was so stunned by this grownup, almost motherly concern for the hard-working man in Tossia's manner and tone, that he even forgot to switch off his saw. But shaking off the spell, he cut down a young birch tree growing next to the stump and sat on its springy trunk as if it were a bench.

"Quick work," Tossia said.

"Know-how, that's all," Ilya said casually, scooping up some soup with his spoon.

"Well, I'm off," Tossia said, and made no move. Timidly she fingered the wonder saw and begged: "Can I have a go? Just one small tree! Don't be selfish, let me try!"

Ilya switched on the saw for her. With the tense expression of a hunter tracking down his game on his first shoot, Tossia started for the nearest birch tree, but taking pity on it, chose a pine instead. She brought the saw against the trunk, there was a soft whir, and down went the little tree. She laughed like a happy child and looked at Ilya, inviting him to share her delight.

"How does it feel?" Ilya asked, just to please the child.

"It tickles," Tossia admitted, holding the whirring saw in her outstretched hands, her whole body vibrating with it.

She felled two other young trees, and, carried away by the game, began to steal up to a century-old pine, but was stopped in time by Ilya.

"You'll hurt yourself, and I'll get the blame," he said, switching off the saw.

"This saw's terrific," Tossia said, putting it down on the stump and never noticing that she was using Ilya's expression.

She was moved to tears, it was so wonderful to have Ilya worry about her. It was like having the elder brother she had always dreamed of. She suddenly remembered the trade mark on the saw.

"Friendship," she uttered solemnly, stroking the saw and glancing at Ilya. "Well, I'll have to be running along."

She swayed but did not move, as though her boots had frozen into the snow. She just stood there beside the saw and watched Ilya eat. For a brief moment their eyes met. She started and rushed away as fast as she could go, afraid that Ilya would read all her secrets in her eyes and tease her afterwards.

"Know-how, that's all," Ilya said under his breath, watching Tossia's slim little figure flicker between the trees.

All at once the excitement went out of the game, the way it does for a shrewd chess player once he knows his opponent is much weaker than he had at first supposed. Ilya knew he would play the game to the end, but his interest in the girl was already gone. When it came to the point, she proved to be no different from all the other girls he had met in his life, except that maybe she had a bit more cheek.

"They're all the same, only their names and hairdos are different," Ilya summed it up.

Fil appeared from behind the piled-up branches, picking his teeth with a bit of wood.

"Your sweetheart's spoiling you, bringing your dinner here," he said enviously, indicating the kettle with a nod.

"She's small but she knows what's what," Ilya agreed, spooning up the porridge.

"Is she giving in?" Fil asked, looking searchingly into Ilya's face.

"She's biting. . . . If I could only kiss her. Some girls are terribly hard to handle until after you've kissed them."

"Go to it then," Fil said sourly. "But remember, time's marching on!" He pushed up his sleeve and poked at his wrist watch with his outsize toothpick.

Ilya threw the spoon into the empty kettle.

"Come down to Kamchatka tonight," he said in a casual tone.

"She'll come? To Kamchatka?" Fil was so staggered, he almost fell forward.

"I'll try and bring her," Ilya said modestly. "Once I get hold of them. . . ."

"Aren't women the limit!" Fil's indignation was perfectly genuine.

He threw away his toothpick, and pulled his cap down over his ears.

"Your cap slipping?" Ilya said with a chuckle.

Tossia's Heart

Late that evening Tossia was walking home from school, cheerfully swinging her cheap little brief case. It was very still, with large, fluffy snowflakes falling.

There was plenty of snow that winter. The houses, buried in it up to their windows, seemed to be squatting on their haunches.

By comparison, people appeared taller than they were, even Tossia could easily touch the eaves of any roof now.

Ilya stepped forward from a dark alley way where he had been waiting for her.

"Mind if I walk with you?"

Tossia shifted to the side of the road, making room for him.

"I don't own the street. . . ."

Fil, who was sauntering a little distance behind them with his gang, gave a shrill whistle.

"We'll be waiting," he called out, waving towards Kamchatka.

Ilya looked warily at the unsuspecting girl beside him.

"He's a nasty type," she said.

"He is that, yes," Ilya hastened to agree, betraying his friend for this worthy cause. "On the other hand, we can't all be angels. The world would be too dull to live in then."

Tossia shrugged, hearing it put this way for the first time, but quickly decided there was a certain amount of sense in his words, and graciously inclined her head in agreement.

They walked in silence down the deserted street, now appearing in the triangles of light cast by the street lamps where the snowflakes seemed to flock like moths, now vanishing in the gloom, shunned even by the snow. Tossia kept a good distance from Ilya, there was room for quite a fair-sized man between them. Whenever Ilya tried to move nearer and eliminate the gap that hurt his male vanity, Tossia quickly took a step sideways, making the distance safe again. Careful that Ilya should not see, she kept straining upwards and actually walking on tiptoe to appear taller than she was. She stared straight ahead, as if she never even suspected Ilya was there beside her.

It was her first grownup walk in her life, she was both frightened and thrilled. Of late Ilya had begun to treat her differently, she saw it but was not sure what it meant. To her the most frightening thing in entering upon this new and strangely fascinating stage of her life was that she might make some awful blunders in her inexperience and lose her dignity.

At the crossroads Ilya turned to the left.

"This way it's shorter," Tossia said, swinging her brief case to the right.

Ilya took her brief case away, swung it to the left and said: "And this way it's longer."

After some thought Tossia decided that sometimes the longer way was the better way, and followed Ilya. Deprived of her brief case she did not know what to do with her hands. She swung both arms forward and back simultaneously, as though they were joined together and could not work separately. Tossia tried her hardest to walk slowly and proudly the way girls do when their boy friends are seeing them home. But she kept forgetting she was a grown-up person, and now and again broke into a skip, leaving Ilya behind. She never thought mere walking could be so difficult. Strolling arm in arm must be sheer torture, then.

"Don't rush so, there's no fire!" Ilya said, taking hold of her elbow. "Can't you just take a walk?"

"I can't walk slowly," Tossia admitted. "Must be my legs or something. . . ."

Turning into the main street, they ran straight into Katya and Sasha. Judging by the amount of snow on their shoulders they must have been walking for hours.

"It's a shame staying indoors in this lovely weather," Tossia mumbled in embarrassment.

"It certainly is," Ilya seconded.

Sasha produced a pack of cigarettes, and Ilya a box of matches. While the men lighted up, Katya gazed fondly at Sasha, and Tossia at Ilya, simply to do as Katya did. The older girl glanced at Tossia and coughed meaningfully, glad to have caught her out. Tossia dropped her eyes guiltily; the next moment she tossed her head defiantly but too late to impress Katya, who was gazing

rapturously at her clumsy Sasha again, as if he was the best-looking chap in the world. Wasn't it funny how love blinded some girls!

The couples parted. Katya and Sasha slipped into the blessed darkness of a side street, and Tossia and Ilya continued sedately down the street to the hostel.

Ilya cleared his throat and made his little speech.

"That first time I saw you," he said, placing a hand on Tossia's shoulder.

She jumped as if she had been stung.

"What d'you think you're doing?" she gasped.

"It's just a habit of mine," Ilya muttered, glaring at his guilty hand as though it were all its own fault, and thrust it into his pocket to keep it out of mischief.

"Try getting rid of it," Tossia said.

"I will," Ilya promised solemnly, cleared his throat again and resumed his yarn. "Well, that first time I saw you. . . ."

In the meantime, Fil was putting his gang through their paces near Kamchatka. He decided he might as well get a good laugh at Tossia's expense if he was going to lose his astrakhan.

"Now look, you're Ilya and I'm Tossia," he said to his bosom pal, a tall lanky chap they called Longlegs. "The rest of you, out of sight!"

The gang hid behind the snowdrifts and woodpiles. Fil made Longlegs sit on the earthen bank, climbed into his lap and enacted a grotesque love scene. Then he jumped down, gave a shrill whistle, and the whole gang came out of hiding with wild whoops and screams. Each of them made enough noise for two, but Longlegs outdid everyone, yelling and hitting two pieces of metal together. Fil raised a hand and they all fell silent.

"Good. Only put more life into it," he said, very pleased.

Longlegs, bent over double behind a woodpile, poked his head out and looked down the street.

"They're coming," he announced in a deep whisper.

Fil waved a hand and the gang went into hiding. Then he stole on tiptoe to the corner of the hostel and peeped out.

"Good night, Ilyushka," he heard Tossia saying.

"Let's walk a bit more, shall we?"

"Enough's enough," Tossia said adamantly, and held out her hand for the brief case.

Ilya took a step back and held on to the brief case as though expecting Tossia to take it away by brute force. She smiled at the very idea and stamped her feet to shake the snow off her felt boots. Ilya stared at them, fascinated by their tiny size.

"What size do you take?"

"Thirty three," Tossia admitted, guiltily.

"Kindergarten size! All right, if you won't walk, let's go and sit on that bank," he said with studied nonchalance, nodding towards the blank wall of the hostel facing the common.

Fil, who was spying on them, shot out of sight.

"On Kamchatka, you mean!" Tossia gasped. "Gosh, you are a sly fox, Ilyushka!"

"Not at all! You're supposed to be brave, and you're just plain scared!"

"Bears are the only things that scare me! You'll be sitting there with me and thinking of someone else. No thank you! You're only pretending with me, aren't you?"

Ilya was put out for a moment, thinking that Tossia must have found out about the bet he had made with Fil. But his sixth, hunter's sense, which invariably came to his aid when he was chasing a girl, told him that there was nothing to worry about. It was all very simple: no man had ever taken any notice of this cocky and not very pretty girl, and it seemed to her too good to be true that someone so handsome could be seriously attracted to her, shrimp that she was. For a moment Ilya pictured the chaos in her poor little heart, and smiled with kindly condescension.

"Why should I pretend? I like you. . . . Understand?" he said in the artificial tone of a strong and essentially just man whom circumstances were forcing to deceive a child.

Ilya heard the false note in his voice and it made him angry at himself, at Tossia for being so difficult and at Fil for egging him on to take that stupid bet. The honest thing to do would be to drop Tossia with all her childish fears, and go and make love to Anfissa again. But things had gone too far, and backing

out at this stage would mean admitting publicly that he was beaten. Besides, he had no desire to part with his fine deerskin cap.

"It's her own damn fault," he made the excuse to himself again, remembering what an ass she had made him look at the club dance.

"I like you an awful lot," he repeated patiently, knowing from past experience that no girl minds hearing stuff like that over and over again. "A lot, see?"

"I don't believe you," Tossia said, but the quiver in her voice belied the words. She looked with kindly curiosity at this man, the first in the whole wide world to appreciate her true worth.

"Why, I keep thinking of you when I'm at home and when I'm working in the forest too," Ilya went on brazenly, getting into his stride now that Tossia's resistance was obviously weakening.

"I don't believe a word of it," she said happily, stamping down the fluffy snow on the path. It was terribly difficult to stand there like a block of wood and do nothing when someone was telling you for the first time in your life that he liked you and kept thinking of you all the time, at home and at work.

"The very sight of you makes my heart miss a beat," he declared emotionally, little bothering to try and sound original for the sake of small fry like Tossia.

"I don't believe a word anyway!" Tossia sang out jubilantly, and pushed her boyish fur cap back with a new gesture, smooth and very feminine.

"When I close my eyes, I see your image before me," Ilya declared to clinch the matter, but somehow it sounded too thick and he wasn't sure how well it would go over.

Tossia giggled in high delight and whispered: "My image?"

"Sure, look," Ilya half turned away from Tossia and stood silent as though peering at something only he could see.

"Well, do you see me?" Tossia asked, really impressed.

"I do."

"Where?"

Ilya waved in the direction of Kamchatka. Fil, who had poked his head out from behind the corner to see exactly how Ilya

would spring the trap on the young cook, jumped back out of sight. Tossia stared into the darkness, but all she saw was a vague shadow slipping behind the house. Maybe *that* was her image, who knows? She stole a look at Ilya and noticed that his eyelashes were quivering.

"Don't peep," she said, holding her brief case up in front of his face. "What's that—what d'you call it,—that image wearing?"

Ilya shuffled his feet and made an effort to remember what he had seen her in.

"A blue dress," he said uncertainly.

"With a white collar?" asked Tossia incredulously.

"Sure," Ilya asserted triumphantly and opened his eyes before Tossia could trip him up on the cuffs or some such thing.

"D'you believe me now? Let's go and sit down somewhere."

He took Tossia's hand and pulled her a little closer to see whether she was ready to go to Kamchatka or whether he'd have to work on her a bit longer. She took one step and stopped short, planting her feet hard on the porch step. Ilya let go of her hand at once, careful not to scare off his game.

"The trouble you give a chap," he mumbled plaintively.

Tossia dropped her head guiltily and began to stamp the snow about her with such thoroughness and absorption as if she was being paid for it. She did not want to offend the first man to fall in love with her at long last, but then going with him to the notorious Kamchatka was rather too frightening. She glanced up at Ilya like a tiny mouse caught in a trap.

"Come on, Tossia," he urged. "We'll sit down and talk. . . . We won't be the first to do it."

A bright idea suddenly struck Tossia.

"Let's just be friends, all right?"

Ilya made a wry face: it was like taking a draught of wine and finding it to be very flat water.

"That's exactly what we are going to do," he said off-handedly as though he had meant it all along. "And it's nicer sitting there than standing here in the wind. . . . Come on, Tossia, don't stall. . . ."

"And Anfissa?" Tossia cried, remembering her lucky rival with a shock. "Honestly, what sort of a person are you? She's your . . . girl friend, and yet you're asking me to come to Kamchatka with you. I'm not going. After all she's my friend, we're room-mates, her bed's next to mine too. . . ."

Ilya stared at her in smiling surprise and looked away, embarrassed by her look of righteous indignation.

"Why, what about Anfissa?" he said rather lamely. "I did go about with her at one time, but I never think of her now. . . . There's nothing so wonderful about her, except maybe the way she does her hair but. . . ."

"You like her hairdo, do you?" Tossia asked, storing away the knowledge for future reference.

"Oh, don't be such a prude!" Ilya said angrily, maddened by this new obstacle. "If she were you she'd never bother about this room-mate stuff! What more do you want me to say? Look, if you really want to know, I'm . . . I almost love you."

Ilya, without exactly knowing why, never said "I love you" to anyone. It wasn't that he kept the words for someone he hoped to meet one day. No, he simply believed it was a luxury girls could do very well without. And now he resented Tossia more than ever for being so stubborn and making him break his rule.

"I almost love you! Can you understand that or aren't you grown-up enough?" he demanded with a challenge, his patience wearing thin.

Ilya never suspected that his barb would go straight home. The thing Tossia dreaded most just then was that he would think her a child, incapable of understanding the feelings of grownups, would send her home to bed and never come near her again.

"I understand everything, I'm no child," she said softly, looking down.

She had already finished stamping all the snow around her and obviously did not know what to do next. Seeing that she was out of work, Ilya pushed up some fresh snow with his foot. Tossia nodded her thanks and proceeded to stamp this new lot with more thoroughness than ever.

"If you do understand, why don't you come then?" Ilya asked reproachfully. "Maybe it's Vera who says you mustn't?"

"What has Vera got to do with it?" Stung, Tossia jerked up her chin. "The idea! I'm not a minor. . . ."

To prove to Ilya how grown-up and independent she was, Tossia made a deliberate step in the direction of Kamchatka. She thought better of it at once, but too late. Ilya quickly took her arm and, assuming the dignified carriage of a man who has no ulterior motives, led her on. Having bragged of her independence, Tossia had no choice but to shuffle on obediently, as meek as a lamb being led to slaughter.

She shrank into a tight little ball, cursing herself for the mess she always made of things: here she was going to Kamchatka when she did not want to go there at all. . . . There was no helping it now: she had to pay for her taste of the fascinating adult life. Ilya looked down at her, saw her shut her eyes tight like a frightened child, and for a fleeting moment he actually felt sorry for her: putting up such a brave fight and then getting caught so stupidly.

"It's late, you know, time to go to bed," she whimpered, although she knew she had nothing to hope for. "I won't be able to do my job tomorrow. . . ."

"Some job!" Ilya dismissed the matter scornfully.

"What do you mean?" Tossia gasped, stopping and facing him. "You said you liked my cooking a lot, no one asked you to. . . . If you're a cook you don't count, is that it?"

She pulled her arm free and rushed back to the safety of the porch.

"Why, I never meant that," Ilya was all repentance, cursing himself for hurting Tossia's professional pride at so wrong a moment.

Cautiously he approached her and offered her his arm, inviting her to trust him.

Tossia shook her head uncompromisingly.

His patience exhausted, Ilya took her arm and gently tried to force her to go with him. Tossia went as tense as a coiled steel spring, jerked free and leapt on to the porch again.

"Don't get so fresh!" she said angrily, and straightened her fur cap with her old gawkily boyish gesture.

"Why, you are a proud little shrimp!" Ilya said, admiring the unattainable girl in spite of himself, and no longer able to tell if he was still shamming to win that blasted bet or whether he was being sincere. "I never thought you were like that! So you just want to be friends?"

"Don't be so flippant about it," she said sternly. "I wouldn't trust you that much now!"

She poked the tip of her little finger out of a hole in her mitten.

"You wouldn't? Not even that much?" Ilya said with phoney dejection, and suddenly changed his tone, quite surprising himself: "I like you even better the way you are now!"

"I don't believe you," Tossia stammered out. "It's true what people said about you. Goodness, what a man! Good night."

Tossia snatched her brief case out of his hands, slipped into the door and banged it shut. Once indoors, she stamped her feet very loud at first, and then softer and softer, to make him think she had run to her room. Crouching, and pressing her ear to the door, she listened hard to what was going on outside. She was beginning to feel sorry she had treated him so cruelly, and had he called her just then and begged, maybe she would have come out.

Ilya, however, had evidently reconciled himself to her attitude. Tossia heard the snow crunch under his feet on the porch, then the second step down gave its usual plaintive squeak, and all grew still. She straightened up, her pride hurt. Was he so anxious to believe her? But going out and calling him was more than she could do. A new and strange something had taken hold of her and was directing all her actions.

So this was what the coveted life of grownups was like!

Too overwhelmed by all these hopeless complications to face her room-mates, Tossia picked up the broom and started dusting the snow off her felt boots with furious swipes. The swipes became less vehement and finally stopped altogether. Tossia leaned her cheek against the ice-cold timber wall, and burst into tears of pity for herself, for the poor wolf, whom she had hurt so terribly, and for

her clear and simple little-girl world which the time had come for her to leave forever.

Vera came out into the corridor, slide-rule in hand, to see who was it.

"What are you snivelling about? Has someone hurt you or what?"

Tossia shook her head.

"It's me who's hurt someone. . . ."

"Well, let that someone do the crying then!"

"He won't, he's strong. . . . But I'm sorry for him all the same. . . ."

"You're all mixed up, I see."

"Yes, I am a bit, Mummy Vera," Tossia agreed readily.

"All right, come inside, you don't want to flood the corridor."

Vera put her arm round Tossia and took her away.

* * *

Out in the street, Fil watched Ilya striding alone to Kamchatka.

"What's wrong? Fish got away?" he called out.

"Nothing doing. . . . She's playing hard to get," Ilya said with a vague gesture.

Fil whistled disappointedly, his gang rushed out of hiding with hoots and yells. However, with no Tossia there, the excitement soon fizzled out. They crowded round their leaders.

"We're frozen stiff," Freezer said to Ilya, his teeth chattering. "You'll have to stand us a drink."

"Tomorrow, not now," Ilya said sullenly, and walked away.

Fil ran his eye over his shivering gang.

"Where's Longlegs?" he demanded sternly, like an army commander taking a roll-call of a picked detachment.

The gang exchanged puzzled glances. Fil gave a shrill whistle, and Longlegs, who had dozed off behind a snowdrift, jumped up at the signal and started hammering on his piece of metal for all he was worth.

"What a crew!" Fil said with disgust.

* * *

Tossia made straight for Anfissa's bedside table and took a long, carpingly critical look at herself in the large mirror.

"Mummy Vera, d'you think someone could . . . what d'you call it . . . fall for me?"

"Why not," Vera answered indifferently, going back to her drawing again.

Feeling bucked, Tossia kicked her brief case under her bed and slipped out of her cheap, flimsy overcoat.

She came up behind Vera and watched her, overawed and proud of sharing a room with someone who had the brains to understand such terribly difficult things.

"I could never study by correspondence if my life depended on it," Tossia said honestly. "The will power it takes! There's no one standing over you with a stick, and yet you sit and study!"

She measured the thickness of the textbook with her finger, picked up Vera's ruler and scratched behind her ear with it.

"Mummy Vera, you're a heroine!" she announced solemnly.

"Don't talk nonsense."

"But you are!" Tossia insisted. "If I had my way I'd give orders and medals to everyone who finished a correspondence course: an order for the institute, and a medal for the technical school."

"You'd run out of metal soon, there are too many of us," Vera told her.

"Oh, you, you don't know your own worth," Tossia said reproachfully.

Balancing with her arms like a tightrope walker, and carefully planting her feet on one narrow floor board, Tossia went back to the mirror, took another look at her face and well pleased with what she saw waltzed away, knocking over a stool in her excitement.

Vera stopped working and watched her curiously. Abruptly, Tossia's smiling expression changed to a frown, and going up to the window she pressed her face against the frost-painted glass.

"Why so fidgety? Get bad marks at school, or what?" Vera wanted to know.

Tossia dismissed the idea with a contemptuous wave of her hand.

"If it was no more than that! You see, a certain person opened his heart to me, and I was hard on him. You know how we women act sometimes. I wasn't even woman-like, actually. . . ."

"Never mind," Vera consoled her. "You'll smile to your certain person tomorrow, and all will be well."

"Tomorrow?"

Tossia took a look at the clock, and without bothering to put on her coat, dashed out of the room, flew along the corridor and out of the front door into the thick of the snow.

She caught up with Ilya as he was approaching the men's hostel.

"What's up? You'll catch cold, you little idiot!"

"Ilya, are you feeling bad?" Tossia asked, gazing up into his face with remorse.

"Bearablely so," he said, and taking off his heavy coat, wrapped it round her. "Why, I believe you're sorry for me?"

"A little. . . ."

Ilya had had all kinds of experience with girls: girls had loved him, hated him, gone away with broken hearts, left him high and dry, threatened him with a dash of vitriol in his face,—but it had never occurred to any one of them to feel sorry for him. The unexpectedness of it dazed him for a moment. It wasn't that his conscience troubled him. Actually, he forgot all about the bet just then, it was too silly to bother his head about. But it seemed so funny that this never-been-kissed infant should pity him, that a twinge of gratitude stirred in his heart. Quite frankly, it was nice having someone feel sorry for you, a huge, hulking fellow, at least when it was done as guilelessly and sweetly as Tossia was doing it.

Tossia snuggled deeper into the huge overcoat, the collar making a sort of hood over her head, her chin on the top button.

"Are you feeling better now?" she asked with just the slightest trace of slyness, unconsciously demanding a reward for her selfless action.

"You funny little cook, you! You're so small and yet your heart's. . . ."

"What about my heart? It's a regular heart, size 33."

Ilya's arm reached for the girl with a habitual gesture. His instinct told him that Tossia's resistance had collapsed and that she would not only allow him to kiss her now, but would willingly go to Kamchatka with him. But suddenly he wondered if he ought to treat her the way he treated other girls, and his arm, suspended in mid-air behind Tossia's back, dropped heavily.

"Run home before you catch cold," he said gruffly, puzzled by his own behaviour and very much suspecting that he was being a damned fool.

Tossia started off at a run, turned back to see what he was doing, tripped and fell. She scrambled to her feet at once, and rubbing her sore knee, hobbled home.

Ilya remained standing in the middle of the road watching her out of sight.

Payday

There was a queue outside the cashier's window in the office, not a very long queue, but not too short either, just long enough, in fact, to make the more impatient try and get their pay out of turn. The lumberjacks came up one by one and signed for their money with a badly leaking fountain pen. Twice a month this faulty office tool left its inky mark on the fingers of all the staff to a man. Had this pen been lying on the ground no one would have troubled to pick it up, and yet the mistrustful cashier thought it worth chaining to his window frame with a thick electric wire, strong enough to tether an elephant.

Katya and Sasha sat at a small wobbly table a few feet away from the window. Katya was selling lottery tickets, and her faithful Sasha was helping her all he could.

"Who wants a Volga? Anyone want a motorcycle? Now, this one is sure to fetch a Volga!" he called out from time to time in a thundering voice.

Ilya stood in the queue with the rest, honestly awaiting his turn for perhaps the first time in his life. He kept glancing at

the door which might at any moment admit Tossia, come to collect her modest pay. If Ilya was boss, he'd raise her salary to a thousand a month. No, ten thousand—he wouldn't grudge her a little extravagance.

The door into the telephone room opened with a familiar squeak, and Anfissa appeared. Ilya's eyes met hers, and he turned away hurriedly. Chuckling softly, Anfissa walked straight up to him and got in line ahead of him.

"Some people always try to barge in," Gavrilovna, the canteen dish-washer, grumbled, "and here I've got to stand and wait with the rheumatism I've got!"

"It is her turn," Ilya said not too confidently.

Xan Xanich came in and made a bee-line for Nadya, whose turn was almost due, but Gavrilovna's grumbling at Anfissa made him stop short and quickly slip into the tail of the line, lest there should be a row. Nadya waved to him invitingly, but he spread out his hands and shrugged to tell her he'd rather wait his rightful turn than have trouble with the others.

Anfissa and Ilya did not talk as they slowly moved up to the window, and there was no shade of intimacy in the way they looked at one another, they were just two people standing in the same queue. Their turn came at last. They signed for their money, getting their fingers stained like all the others before them, the neat Anfissa a little less and Ilya a little more. Anfissa received a slender batch of bills, and Ilya a huge wad tied with a mattress-striped paper band.

"I thought you were going to push me out of the line," Anfissa said mockingly as they turned away from the window. "Let's go in, you've quite forgotten the way." She nodded in the direction of the telephone room.

"I've been so busy lately," Ilya muttered and then, with sudden shame for his clumsy lying, he looked straight into Anfissa's eyes and said: "We don't have to fence, do we? I'm sure you know the reason."

Anfissa inclined her head. Some kindly souls had already told her about his dancing attendance on the young cook and getting nowhere, or so it was rumoured.

"I hear you're eating out of Tossia's hands?"

Ilya put up a mild protest.

"Not really. . . ."

"Not just eating, lapping it up! It's there for all to see, Ilya darling. There's only one thing I don't understand: is it still the bet or are you in earnest?"

"I can't make it out myself," Ilya admitted. "Everything's sort of mixed up. . . ."

He caught himself thinking that it would be wonderful to talk to some good, wise friend about Tossia, to a friend who would straighten things out for him and tell him what to do next. Pouring his soul out to Anfissa, who mocked and laughed at everything, would simply mean betraying that fragile, not very clear but already strangely sacred something, that was binding him closer and closer to Tossia with every day.

"D'you like that sort of life?" Anfissa asked with unfeigned curiosity, and there was a shade of envy in her voice, perhaps not envy exactly, but a suddenly aroused desire for a taste of that strange thing Ilya was experiencing.

Ilya shrugged helplessly for answer.

"What has she done to you! You were a hell of a fellow and now you're more like a monk. Why did you want to go and fall in love? What on earth for?"

"But I'm not in love at all, where did you get the idea?" Ilya objected vehemently, prepared at all costs to protect Tossia and his yet undefined feeling for her from Anfissa's spiteful attacks. "She just amuses me, I've never met a girl like her. . . ."

"That's it, darling, that's how it always begins."

Anfissa glanced pityingly at this new, strange Ilya. He had such a trapped, humbled look, that she had to turn away quickly to hide a smile.

"Don't laugh!" he told her sharply.

"Forgive me, darling, but it *is* funny," she said gently, like a nurse to a patient. "You and Tossia—it's fantastic! Of all the crazy things this is the craziest."

"You leave Tossia alone," Ilya burst out, ready for battle.

"Yes, dear, promise!" Anfissa raised her arms heavenward com-

cally. "But you yourself used to call her an undersized shrimp, you know. Perhaps I heard you wrong though!"

Ilya shuffled heavily.

"I was blind then," he said, reluctant to be drawn out.

"Oh, I see the whole thing now!" Anfissa cried mockingly. "It was because you were blind that you used to come here and make love to me."

"It has nothing to do with you at all," Ilya said rudely, finding Anfissa terribly difficult to talk to.

"Don't worry, that didn't hurt me. All I want to try and understand is what sort of spell did she put on you? It's just a woman's curiosity, darling. Don't mind my saying so, but she's nothing to look at. . . ."

This frightened Ilya. If he let Anfissa make another stab or two at poor little defenceless Tossia, he might in spite of himself start seeing her with Anfissa's eyes. If he did, his as yet insecure happiness wouldn't stand a chance.

"What's it to you?" he demanded more angrily than he had meant to, ready to defend Tossia with might and main. "Why should you care? We were never in love, it was just something—just something to kill the time. Wasn't it?"

Anfissa smiled without mirth.

"Maybe that love of ours wasn't much of a love, and maybe I don't need you that badly, but I'm not used to being jilted. I'm greedy like all women, darling. What you said about our killing time was really clever of you. . . ."

Although Anfissa spoke in her usual bantering tone, Ilya sensed a deep-lying hurt in her words, and regretted his callous words. Why did he have to fight with her? There's nothing worse than fighting with the woman you're leaving. And then they had nothing to quarrel about, really. . . . He wanted to say something to comfort her, maybe even beg her forgiveness. But he had never asked anyone's forgiveness in his life, a woman's least of all, and in his heart of hearts he considered it was a waste of time, a lot of mush unworthy of a man. And so he squashed the impulse without much effort.

"Look, don't take it like that," was all he said with gruff kindness.

Anfissa, who was not used to her men friends sparing her feelings, seemed glad to accept even this bit of kindness for what it was worth. She looked up quickly at Ilya and the habitual ironic twinkle went out of her eyes as she read the sincere friendliness in his.

"You might have told me since you've got it so bad," she said with none of her former sting. "I won't make trouble, no need to worry. . . . You're not the first, Ilya darling. You all love me while the fun lasts, but it's one of those Mussias or Tossias you start looking for when you feel you want the real thing. It's nothing new to me."

There was a note of such long-gnawing pain in her voice, that Ilya felt ill at ease, which was usually the case with him when he sensed obscurely that he should do something but did not know what.

"You're laying it on a bit thick again," he said lamely.

Tossia came running into the office and called out gaily to Sasha:

"Pick the luckiest ticket for me, will you?"

She joined the queue and looked about her. Suddenly, she noticed Ilya and Anfissa standing at the far end of the dark corridor, and recoiled as if she had run head on into a brick wall. She tried to look the other way, but her eyes refused to obey her. It was one thing to know that Ilya had had some sort of affair with Anfissa ages ago, before she ever came, and quite another to actually see them standing there together for all the world to see, gazing tenderly at one another and talking indecencies.

At first Tossia thought they were talking about her, pulling her to pieces, and that Ilya was telling Anfissa what a silly fool Tossia was, a simpleton who believed every word he said and practically threw herself at him. However, after watching them for a while, Tossia realised that she was wrong: Ilya and Anfissa were talking about something very intimate that concerned themselves alone, and never remembered she so much as existed. A fat lot they cared about her. And they were not laughing a bit,

that they certainly were not. But she'd much rather they did laugh, split their sides laughing, and not stand there gazing so tenderly and fondly at one another. Tossia was sure Ilya had never once looked at her like that.

What surprised her most was that new and strange touch of sadness in her lucky rival's expression. And she was beautiful in a new way. She realised that Anfissa, always lovely in a glamorous but rather superficial way, was more attractive with this new, perhaps more intelligent beauty of hers. And once again, as at her first dance in the club, Tossia involuntarily felt a second-rate sort of person compared with Anfissa, the underdog if ever there was one.

"Nothing doing! I'm not going to feel like that!" she thought angrily.

Katya intercepted Tossia's lowering look and nudged Sasha. In an effort to disperse the girl's gloom the good old soul yelled at the top of his voice: "Here's a Volga going at three rubles, who wants it?"

Although Katya sat only a little way from Ilya and Anfissa and kept her eyes and ears open, all she saw was that they were standing and chatting in their old way. But Tossia's eyes, keener for first love and first pangs of jealousy, saw that Ilya was feeling gratefully fond of Anfissa just then, and that Anfissa, too, was grateful to him for something kind he had just said to her.

Everything about them seemed to indicate that they both knew something about life that Tossia had not an inkling of. And in a flash it dawned on her that the thing that bound them together was more than ordinary friendship. They looked like a married couple meeting after a separation; they had not yet quite made up the quarrel, but they were already well on the way to it.

Tossia saw their adult love in its entirety, down to its deepest and most secret recesses. And in the light of this tested, familiarly shameless love, Tossia suddenly realised what a gawky school-girl she was with all her childish dreams of making a lover-friend of Ilya, and with all her circumspect scheming: must she let Ilya kiss her tonight or should she hold him off a bit longer.

The jolt sent her tumbling down from the clouds where she

had climbed unasked and unaided. She gasped for breath, stunned and deafened by her fall.

She was sorry not so much for herself as for the loss of that wonderful sense of being as good as the next girl, which she had lately begun to feel was her right. Little by little she had got used to the thought that someone needed her, and that had put her on a level with all the lucky girls whom someone loved, be it in Siberia, in the Ukraine, in China, in the United States, in Bulgaria, Cuba, and whatever other countries there were.

Katya left Sasha to carry on alone, and came up to Tossia.

"It's been going on for ages. I told you, didn't I?" she said with a smug look.

"You always speak the truth," Tossia agreed listlessly.

Suddenly everything became painfully clear to her: why, of course, the reason why Ilya had flirted with her this past week was because Anfissa had broken off with him. All she had to do was beckon him, and he went to her at once, he couldn't wait for their affair to start again. . . .

The thought made a vicious stab at her heart, and the scorching pain she felt was no longer that of a child, it was something she had never experienced before. So her longed-for maturity had come at last! Rather than have it come this way, she'd gladly have remained a young innocent for the rest of her life.

"Goodness, what's the matter, child!" Katya cried, startled by Tossia's quivering lips and quickly paling face. "Don't take it so hard, all men are like that." She glanced at her faithful Sasha, busy selling lottery tickets, and quickly amended her general statement: "All except Sasha!"

"I'll show you, you just wait and see! I'll pay you back for this! I'll pay you back for all of us!" Tossia whispered vengefully.

Katya's natural dislike of exaggerated statements outweighed her feeling of pity for her jilted friend, and she could not but protest.

"For all of us? Isn't that too much? And what can you do to him?" Katya thought hard for a moment, weighing up all Tossia's chances for revenge. "No, there's nothing you can do to him."

"You wait and see! I'll prove it to you even if it kills me!"

Katya looked at the small and resolute girl very, very doubtfully, but she did not want to hurt the poor child more than was strictly necessary and so said nothing.

In the meantime, Anfissa was saying to Ilya:

"Drop in sometime anyway . . . for old times' sake. I won't eat you alive, I won't even kiss you without your permission, so you don't stand to lose a thing."

"At it again?" Ilya said regretfully.

"That's the way I am. I was going to take you to the mechanic's place tonight to hear some new records he's got, but of course you won't want to come now, will you?"

Ilya shook his head.

"Naturally you couldn't now. Pity. He's got a lot of jazz numbers, they're terrific!"

Evidently she was already sorry she had been more frank with Ilya than she had meant, and so she pulled on her habitual mask again.

"You miss none of the fun, do you," Ilya said.

"Why not, I'm not in love with anyone!" she said with a challenge, looking straight into his eyes, and then, turning sharply on her high heels, went into her telephone room.

Ilya started back for the cashier's window. He saw Tossia at once and hurried towards her—a smiling, handsome and perfectly guiltless man. If she had not seen him herself, Tossia would never have believed that he had just been flirting shamelessly with the beautiful Anfissa.

Such hypocrisy was too much for her. She quickly locked her fingers tightly together, afraid that she might give in to the urge to scratch the dirty cheat's eyes out.

"Why, Tossia, what's wrong?" Ilya asked, sensing trouble.

He held out his hand in all friendliness. Tossia hit him on the wrist with her locked hands as hard as she could.

"Leave me alone, will you," she said icily. "I wouldn't know you from a hole in the ground, understand?"

Ilya frowned, suspecting that Tossia had learnt something of his idiotic bet with Fil. Tossia noticed the flash of fear in his

eyes and gloated. People in the queue began to whisper, heads were turned towards them. Katya paused on her way to the lottery-ticket table, and stared at Tossia, waiting for her to start revenging herself on Ilya for all womankind.

Ilya took a hesitant step forward.

"Don't come near me or I'll blow up!" Tossia warned him.

She heard her voice breaking into a fishwife's ugly scream, but even this disgusting, undignified yelling she blamed on the loathsome creature she had been on the horrible brink of falling in love with.

Ilya moved a few inches nearer. Tossia jumped aside.

"Don't you ever set foot in my kitchen again!" She shrieked.

"Someone's been pinching the spoons!"

"What!" Ilya roared, flabbergasted. "That's going too far!"

He pushed Tossia out of the way, as carelessly as if she were a twig lying across a forest path, stamped down the corridor and out of the door, slamming it so hard in his rage that the mild Xan Xanich who was signing for his money dropped the pen, and the cashier's head popped out of the little window with fear of a hold-up written large on his face.

Katya hurried to Tossia's side.

"That was talking! I'm proud of you for all the girls in the world!" In a burst of women's solidarity she hugged Tossia hard. "Come on, Tossia, be happy, you've squashed him flat!"

"I *am* happy," Tossia said dejectedly, staring stonily at the pen dangling from its electric wire and dripping ink on the floor.

Farewell to Cooking

Sasha and Ilya came to the girls' hostel to talk those of the girls who were working in town into joining the lumbermen's teams. Sasha's policy was to appeal to their sense of duty, and Ilya's argument was the good money to be made.

"If we could only get one more girl to sign up, we'd have done our job," Sasha said as they came out into the corridor.

Ilya raised his hand to knock on the door where Tossia lived and jerked it back.

"You knock," he asked Sasha.

"She did tie you into knots, did Tossia," Sasha marvelled, and pushed the door open with his shoulder. "Hello, girls, are visitors welcome?"

They were all there except Tossia. Nadya and Xan Xanich were having supper in their family corner, Vera was clicking a small abacus, adding up the months' turnover at the upper depot, and Katya and Anfissa were having tea, each eating her own stuff.

Ilya swept the room with his eyes and fastened them on the bright pictures on the wall. He knew at once that this colourful display belonged to Tossia. Actually he wasn't surprised: he expected to see something as crazy above that infant's bed. Acting grown-up when she should still be playing with dolls!

"Look here, girls," he said, anxious to be done before Tossia came. "We haven't got much time, and besides Sasha and I are no good at this sort of thing, so you'd better agree right away."

"That's what I say too," Sasha seconded him. "Let's not waste time, the thing's clear, just put your names down."

Sasha sat down at the table and produced his note-book.

"Put our names down for what?" Katya asked, pushing a pack of biscuits towards Sasha.

Sasha looked at Ilya, and it struck both of them that they had not explained anything yet. Sasha ate a biscuit with a loud crunch, cleared his throat and plunged into his speech, rattling it off for the tenth time that day.

"The lumbermen can't cope with the trimming of trees. You know how much snow there is. And yet many Komsomol members are taking it easy in the office and elsewhere. And so Ilya and I have been entrusted with straightening this thing out. Each Komsomol member means one and a half per cent, mind that. The girls in the other rooms have signed up, it's up to you now. This doesn't concern Vera and Katya, of course, they are working in the forest as it is. Nadya is not in the Komsomol. So that leaves Anfissa. Listen, Anfissa, switch over to production work. You won't regret it."

"Why should I? The telephone suits me fine."

Sasha looked at Ilya for support.

"Maybe you'll think it over?" Ilya said to Anfissa, not very enthusiastically.

He had to say something if only so that Sasha and the girls should not imagine he was making any special allowances for Anfissa, and yet he simply could not bring himself to give her a pep talk. The straightforward arguments he had just used in the other rooms were no good with Anfissa, for some reason they no longer seemed convincing.

"And besides, you'll earn more in the forest, remember that," Ilya said dully, as in duty bound, remembering to bring out his trump card. "Katya here will bear me out. . . ."

"Honestly, Anfissa, sign up," Katya said, pushing a cup of tea towards Sasha. "You've got the strength, you'll be making as much as I am."

"I make enough now, thank you," Anfissa said stubbornly.

"You haven't got a worker's pride, that's what," Sasha said regretfully. "All right, think it over while I have a cup of tea."

"Make yourself at home, don't mind me," Anfissa said sarcastically, and walked away.

Ilya resented her attitude. Whether she meant it or not, her refusal was an insult to those working in the forest and, therefore, to himself. It occurred to him for the first time that Anfissa was not like the other girls, who did whatever work wanted doing, while she was always side-stepping the hardest, always on the look-out for the easiest way in life. Ilya turned his back on her and began to examine Tossia's gaudy collection of pictures.

"Well then, shall I put your name down?" Sasha asked with forced animation.

A soft patter of felt boots was heard in the corridor; the door opened and there was Tossia, her face rosy from the cold. She glanced at Ilya, who wilted at once, and then at Sasha, sitting at the table, pencil poised over his note-book. She must have missed something very exciting and come just too late, she decided. Tossia believed in her youthful innocence that

all the most thrilling things always happened when she was not there.

"You've put your own names down, but I bet you've forgotten all about me!" she pounced on her friends at once. "Put me down too, I don't want to be left out!" She walked up to the table and only then asked Katya: "What are we signing up for?"

"For work in the forest."

"Is that all?" Tossia sounded disappointed. "And I thought. . . . There's no need, Sasha, I work in the forest anyway."

Ilya stared at her. What cheek to compare her job with theirs!

"You may be working in the forest but you're not on the main job," he said.

"What d'you mean by that?" Tossia flared up. "Don't you and Sasha stuff yourselves full with my cooking every day and ask for more? You'd better not try any of your tricks on me, and keep your personal feelings out of this!"

Ilya gave an embarrassed grunt and walked away.

"There is a difference," Sasha explained, coming to Ilya's rescue. "You're a good cook, nobody says you're not, still yours is an auxiliary job. The main job's felling trees, fulfilling the lumber output plan. . . ."

"Ha-ha! I'd like to see you fulfilling your plan on an empty stomach! How nice, you're all building communism, and I'm not in it, just something tacked on! Now I see why some people won't take me seriously. . . . I object! Put my name down for the main job, I want to fulfil the plan too."

"Tossia, don't be an idiot," Katya tried to stop her.

Sasha was calmly drinking his tea, in no apparent hurry to put Tossia's name down. And Ilya, against his better judgement, found himself siding with the headstrong girl who'd stick to her guns no matter what.

"Put my name down, hear me?" Tossia shouted at Sasha, snatching the tea out of his hand.

"What a silly fool!" Anfissa said, amused and surprised.

The two of them standing there together invited Ilya, as it were, to compare them again and make his choice. He looked first at the small, plain Tossia and then at the beautiful Anfissa.

"Why discourage others? You'd better put your own name down," he said to Anfissa.

"Do your stuff then, fire me with enthusiasm!" she challenged him.

"Firing you would take all the wood in this forest and more," Ilya said with a hopeless wave of his hand.

Tossia giggled approvingly, glad that Ilya had seen through Anfissa at last. Sasha wondered what to do next, and frowned with the effort. Things had got quite out of hand: Anfissa, who was tough enough for the job, had refused flatly, and the frail and useless Tossia was not signing up in quite the right spirit either. It was not awareness of her duty as a Komsomol member that made her volunteer, far from it, it was nothing but childish spite.

"Pay no attention to Tossia," Katya said. "What good could a tiny tot like her be in the forest?"

"Plenty, even if just trimming trees," Tossia said, deeply hurt.

"You could never lift an axe."

"I could too!" Tossia said stubbornly and took a swing with her two hands to show them just how she would wield an axe. "I'll take one swipe and knock it to hell! D'you think lifting those huge pots is easier? I'd like to see you try..." Desperately she looked about her for support. Xan Xanich, always quick to sympathise, smiled at her and nodded encouragingly. "It's true, isn't it, Xan Xanich?"

"True enough... Pots differ too, of course," Xan Xanich mumbled, careful not to deviate from the truth and yet anxious to help Tossia because she had appealed to him for support. "One pot I repaired last year, why, I almost had a rupture..."

"Hear that?" Tossia cried jubilantly. "Xan Xanich would never tell a lie. Come on, Sasha, put my name down..."

She poured him another cup of tea to soft-soap him, and taking a big lump of sugar from Anfissa's paper bag, popped it in.

"All right, it's a per cent and a half after all," Sasha gave in and took a sip of tea. "If she's no good we'll switch her back."

"Who'll be no good, me?" Tossia was cut to the quick. "Put my name down in full: Anastasia Polikarpovna Kislitsina."

"Polikarpovna, is it? I never knew you had such a funny patronymic."

Even a hint of disrespect for her father got her back up at once.

"What's funny about it, it's as good as some others' I know," she said sternly and looked at Ilya, expecting him to say something disparaging too.

But he merely inclined his head very gravely, in agreement with Tossia for the first time since their quarrel.

"Made up your mind, Anfissa?" Sasha made his final attempt. "Once the snow melts you can go back to your hello-helloing again."

He was so busy appealing to Anfissa's Komsomol conscience, that he gave no thought at all to Nadya, another possible candidate. She was quietly clearing the table and putting the supper things away.

"Are non-Komsomols allowed?" she asked suddenly, taking a resolute step towards Sasha.

Vera stopped clicking her abacus, and suddenly the room was very still. The only sounds were the ticking of the clock on the wall and the distant whistle of the steam engine.

"That's just like her!" Anfissa grumbled. "Never says a word and then bang! Who's to do your job I'd like to know?"

"There's always someone willing to sit and watch the phone," Nadya dismissed the matter. "Can I put my name down?"

Xan Xanich stood shuffling his feet, which he always did in moments of stress.

"Why, Nadya dear, what for?" he put up a mild protest. "We can save up enough for the furniture as it is, and I'll be getting overtime besides. . . ."

"I'm not doing it for the furniture," Nadya said softly, ashamed of her disloyalty to Xan Xanich. "It's simply that I've too much spare time at the telephone exchange and I get to thinking of all sorts of things. . . ."

"What a thing to say! Too much spare time!" The idea puzzled Anfissa.

"Put my name down," Nadya said doggedly.

"Good for you!" Tossia clapped her hands. "We'll show all the office scribblers how we can work!"

Ilya and Sasha exchanged glances.

"It won't add to our percentage since she's not a Komsomol member, but still," Sasha said, thinking aloud.

"Nadya, you're a sport," he said, getting up and shaking her hand. Ilya did the same.

"Why doesn't anyone shake *my* hand?" Tossia demanded, and offered her hand to Sasha.

"My mistake," Sasha, who upheld fairness and squareness in everything, admitted readily.

Tossia's slender hand disappeared completely in his huge paw, and he pressed it carefully, using only a fraction of his strength. Ilya, conscientiously performing his Komsomol duty, came up next. Looking straight into Tossia's eyes he squeezed her hand with all his might. She endured this brutal handshake manfully, and only afterwards, when no one was looking, tried flexing her crushed fingers.

"You've got guts," Ilya said and looked at her curiously: it struck him that there was a lot more to her than he already knew.

Tossia took a last admiring look at her jolly collection of pictures, and then pulled them all down with a ruthless hand.

"Farewell to cooking!"

Too Many Firs!

Cabbage Leaves on the Snow

It's an old truth that everything in life is a link of a chain.

The thing that worried Tossia least when she was signing up for the forest job was who would take her place. And the elderly Gavrilovna, who had been washing dishes at the canteen since the beginning of time, was as little worried by Tossia's doings or by her youthful ambition to be more than a subsidiary in life. They were next-door neighbours, they met practically every day, yet Gavrilovna never suspected that this small, cocky girl

whom everyone praised for some unknown reason would one day play such a dirty trick on her.

The quiet of her plodding existence was shattered by Tossia's impulsive action. The very next day, the elderly dishwasher was promoted to cook and appointed Tossia's successor. Gavrilovna, it must be said, was anything but ambitious, and it was with reluctance that she made the change-over from dishwasher in the village canteen to chef in Tossia's forest kitchen.

And early the following morning, Tossia, bundled up in all her warmest clothes, turned over the outsize kitchen utensils to the new cook.

"The dishes are kept here, the spoons and forks here, no knives. . . . You'll never run out of firewood, you know. Take the water from the farthest hole in the ice, it has a better taste. . . . Make the servings bigger than you do at the canteen, they're used to second helpings too. After all they work out in the open. . . . Well, good luck, I'm off!"

Tossia heaved the heavy axe on her shoulder and ran along the narrow path trodden in the snow to catch up with Nadya.

With the coming of winter the girls working in the forest donned thick padded jackets and trousers which they tucked into their felt boots. Over these comfortable, warm trousers they wore short, flaring skirts that looked funny and served no useful purpose, except as a customary sign of their sex, the girls being afraid that otherwise they might be mistaken for men.

With clenched teeth Tossia trimmed the trees felled by Ilya. Nadya worked right next to her. And where it took Nadya one good hit, Tossia had to peck with her axe three or four times. The pines and the birches were not so bad, but the firs were terrible.

Nadya gave a sort of grunt every time she struck, the way men did it, and seeing how well she managed, Tossia tried grunting too. Clumsily aping Nadya, she would swing her heavy axe with great difficulty, emit a loud grunt, putting all her strength into the impressive sound, and then, completely spent, wearily drop the axe on the branch.

"Don't waste your breath just for the growl," Nadya told her. "It'll come naturally with time. Honestly, you are a scream!"

It was Tossia's job to haul the branches across the virgin snow to the fire. Where the other girls sank knee-deep, little Tossia sank waist-deep. She had got her boots full of snow, she was so hot she had to push back her head kerchief and open her padded jacket, still she refused to be beaten, and egged herself on by repeating a militant little verse she had made up on the spur of the moment:

*Main job,
Silly old job,
You can't scare me off!*

Ilya, who was working nearby, saw how hard it was on Tossia. He was sorry for her a little, and at the same time very angry with her for attempting this job for sheer stubbornness. He was afraid she'd fall on the snow and never get up again. But she struggled on. She learnt to save her strength by foregoing the grunt, and also to haul the branches along the tracks made by the other girls.

"She's got sense," Ilya thought with approval, and walked up to her.

"Here, take this," he said, feeling strangely bashful and covering it up with surliness, and offered her his small axe. "Mine'll be handier. . . ."

"Why, thanks!" Tossia took the sharp little axe gladly and easily chopped off a bough. "This little axe's got zip."

"I've got zip myself."

"And then some!" Tossia said scornfully. "Look, don't be in such a tearing hurry. . . . I'm your team-mate, you know."

This chance of teasing Tossia was too good for Ilya to miss.

"The day before yesterday you were dying to build communism, and now it seems you're backing out of it already. We've a **plan** to fulfill, you know, and it's catching up on us! One day you're more duty conscious than anyone else, and the next you talk like the most backward of the backward!"

Tossia wanted to hit back, but she was so obviously at fault she merely sighed.

"I never thought of the plan," she admitted.

Since she was a child Tossia had known that plans had to be fulfilled without fail, and that people's attitude to plans determined whether they were good or bad: good people always fulfilled their plans and even overfulfilled them, while bad people failed to fulfill theirs under all kinds of pretexts. It was an appalling thought that, flippantly, she had almost committed an outrage against the OMNIPOTENT PLAN.

Ilya saw remorse in her eyes and regretted his harsh treatment of the scatter-brained youngster.

"You shouldn't have left the kitchen," he said surlily to hide his sympathy for the girl who didn't know when she was well off.

"I'll learn, you wait and see!" she said stubbornly.

"I'm afraid it will be a pretty long wait!"

Ilya took the heavy axe and hurried off before she could refuse to accept the lighter one from him.

"Had a nice chat?" Katya asked with unconcealed sarcasm.

Tossia made an inarticulate sound in reply.

"Mind your step, Tossia! Aren't you forgetting what sort of a chap he is?" Katya stared Tossia down with the relentlessness of a prosecutor. "Shall I sort of cough every time you need reminding?"

"Go ahead, it's your throat. But remember this: I've no intention of falling in love. I'm simply trying to . . . to re-educate him. Yes, I am!" Tossia said with greater firmness, suddenly believing that this was really what she was trying to do. "I want to try and bring out the best in him."

"I know a girl who tried just that, and she's an unmarried mother now," Katya said acidly.

"Don't talk nonsense! Just watch this." Tossia took a deep breath and called out imperatively: "Hey, Ilya!"

"What's up?" Ilya called back sulkily.

"Come here, when I tell you."

Tossia winked at Katya who was stunned speechless by the idea of this small, homely girl riding roughshod over the village sheikh.

"Well?" Ilya asked, pausing halfway towards her.

"D'you have to be so mean?" Tossia attacked him before he could collect his wits.

"Who, me?" he asked, flabbergasted. And that, after he had given her his axe!

"You're felling nothing but firs! Make it more pines and fewer firs. They're much too branchy, it takes too long to trim them and haul them away. . . ."

"What's it got to do with me?" Ilya was amazed at Tossia's muddled thinking. "This is a mixed forest, you know."

"You might at least try!" Tossia insisted.

Her intuition had already told her that it flattered the strong man in Ilya to help weak little her, and so she wanted to make the best of her advantage.

"The very idea," Ilya grumbled.

Katya coughed noisily as a reminder to her young, forgetful friend that Ilya was a dangerous character. Tossia gave her a reassuring wave with her mitten, and turned on Ilya again.

"You got me into this, so you've got to help me now."

She was already conscious of a strange sort of power over Ilya, and being a woman she was anxious to make this power more secure, to make Ilya used to it so it would bind him hand and foot. Despite all this, she honestly believed that she was doing it for his own good, that she was putting a man who had strayed from the straight and narrow path back on to it. She had no intention of making up with him in any other sense; she wanted none of Anfissa's leavings.

Ilya instantly felt the noose tightening round his neck, and afraid he might be losing his independence forever, attempted to break free.

"Who got you into what? It was you who begged and begged!" he said hotly.

Tossia listened with a bored look which plainly said that she knew all his unspoken thoughts and didn't expect to hear anything new or exciting from him.

"There's no reasoning with you," Ilya grumbled for show, capitulating and admitting he was beaten, and went off to fell the trees she wanted.

"I'll have him turning somersaults for me yet!" she bragged to Katya.

"Well, well, well," was all Katya could say.

Truth to tell, she enjoyed it more when Tossia was in trouble because then she could pity her, preach to her and feel vastly superior to her. She actually disliked Tossia now that she seemed head and shoulders over all the girls in town, because it went to show that a girl could live her life quite differently from the way Katya intended living hers.

"We shall see, said the blind," Katya took refuge in this hackneyed phrase, and flung a pitchy conifer branch into the fire.

The frozen needles sputtered to a crackling flame and awakened Churkin, who was taking forty winks huddled on a stump.

"Get into it, fellows!" he yelled hoarsely. *Cry + Scream*

"We're not fellows, we're girls," Katya corrected him. Now that she was in love with Sasha she was becoming as intolerant as he was of misdeeds, misstatements and slips of the tongue. *Po'*

"It's all one," Churkin uttered sententiously. Scratching behind his ear, he took out his saucer-sized watch and checked the time with the sun.

Tossia had not really expected Ilya to obey her at once, but to her amazement he broke all his rules and began to fell nothing but pines and birch trees, leaving the firs, which Tossia found too difficult to handle, well alone.

"What sort of selective felling is this!" Churkin roared. "None of your tricks now, Ilya!"

After that, Ilya had no choice but to return to the firs and fell every single one of them.

* * *

Dinner ready, Gavrilovna started hammering on the buffer with her axe. The lumberjacks came hurrying from the forest, walking single file along the narrow paths—all of them young and

all of them ravenous after working out in the open all morning.

They fell to. After a few spoonfuls of the cabbage soup made by the new cook, they looked at one another in sheer dismay. Fil put what they all thought into words.

"She's certainly no chef," he said, and flung his soup on to the snow.

Everyone began to shout at once.

"It's dish water!"

"I could make better soup myself!"

"What a cook!"

Following Fil's example, many of the lumberjacks threw their soup away and lined up for the next course—buckwheat porridge. Shreds of steaming cabbage leaves lay on the snow.

Gavrilovna's porridge was no more of a success than the soup.

"It's underdone!" ^{ନୋହ}

"And burned, too."

"Not a patch on Tossia's cooking!"

Poor Gavrilovna tried to remember Tossia's instructions.

"Who wants a second helping?" she called out most inaptly.

"Eat it yourself!" Fil growled, sadly munching a piece of bread. "Honestly, it's a laugh! An old married woman, and such a lousy cook!" ^{ଅନ୍ଧାରୁ କୁଟୁରା ମା'ର ମା'ର ମା'ର}

Two of Fil's gang—Longlegs and Freezer, sensing a good row in the making, swaggered over. ^{ଝଗଡ଼ା ଖେଳିବା ପାଇଁ}

"It's clear enough now why her old man's taken a job as a raftsman," Longlegs said, developing Fil's idea further.

"Thinks she's a damned intellectual too!" Freezer joined in. Another thing he hated besides cold, for which he got his nickname, was intellectuals—all of them to a man.

"Mind your tongue, she's old enough to be your mother," Sasha said, feeling awkward as he always did when obliged to pull up his workmates and childhood friends.

Longlegs and Freezer looked at Fil, waiting for orders: should they shut up or should they carry on a bit longer? Fil, who did not believe in rows on an empty stomach, silently moved the bread basket closer. His two friends exchanged glances and also reached for the bread.

The other lumberjacks did the same; they quickly emptied the bread basket and walked away from the kitchen shed. Xan Xanich managed to snatch a huge slice from right under Longlegs' nose, and placed it in front of Nadya.

"A heavy dinner like this calls for a smoke," he said facetiously, and got out his pouch.

There were only four people left at the table. Sasha sat leafing through the note-book in which he had so rashly put down Tossia's name the day before. Nadya was eating her slice of bread, washing it down now and again with a spoonful of the soup no one else would have. To look at her she was doing a job of work and not simply eating her dinner. Tossia and Ilya sat side by side like good friends at the far end of the table, dawdling over their soup.

Going out, Churkin slipped on the cabbage leaves strewn so generously all round.

"A nice state of affairs!" he muttered dejectedly and scratched the back of his head.

Anfissa Meets Dementiev

A lorry overtook Anfissa as she was walking to work and stopped in front of the garage. A young man in hip boots and a brand-new velours hat, pushed far back on his head, got out of the cab. This was Dementiev, the new engineer А. В. Деметев.

He stood holding his suitcase, obviously wondering where to go.

"Where's the office, could you tell me?" he asked Anfissa as she came level with the lorry.

Anfissa turned round and a smile spread over his face at once. Mechanically, he stroked his unshaven cheek.

"Come, I'll show you," Anfissa said graciously, delighted with the impression she had produced.

As they walked on, Dementiev kept turning to look at the beautiful stranger.

"What d'you work as?" he asked.

"I'm . . . I'm an actress," Anfissa made the lie up on the spur of the moment for no reason she could explain. "I'm to play the

part of a girl from a lumber town, and so I've come here to get the atmosphere."

"Oh, I see," Dementiev said with profound respect, and then, hardly concealing his disappointment, added: "And I thought you worked here. . . . How much longer d'you have for . . . getting the atmosphere?"

"Not much longer now. I'll leave as soon as I've learnt how girls in lumber towns fall in love," Anfissa went on with the game. "By the way, that's not the way to wear a hat." She gave his hat the proper tilt with the familiarity which was an actress's right. "That's better. . . ."

"I've never worn one before, you know," Dementiev confessed with the impulsive candidness of a simple, trusting soul who was willing to laugh with a friend at his own foppery. "I bought it to look important. Silly, of course . . . I only graduated a month ago, you know. . . ."

Anfissa studied the young engineer curiously.

"Why are you telling me all this?" she asked. "It doesn't pay to be so frank, you know."

"Never mind," Dementiev said with a laugh. "You can always tell a rabbit by its ears."

"That's the office over there," Anfissa indicated the two-storey office building with a nod. "Good-bye."

"What, so soon? What a small town! But you haven't told me your name, you know. Mine's Dementiev."

He put down his suitcase and held out his hand. A crowd of little boys armed with wooden swords came tearing down the street with deafening whoops and yells.

"They're playing Chapayev," Dementiev said knowledgeably and held on to Anfissa's hand. "What theatre do you play in?"

"The regional." Anfissa was not too sure of her ground and, besides, she was beginning to regret her unnecessary lie.

Petya Churkin, pursued by his little chums, flew right at Dementiev and Anfissa, broke their hands apart in his headlong rush, and raced on.

"Smart little rascal," Dementiev smiled sourly. "I'll come and see a play you're in next time I come to town."

“Thanks.”

Anfissa walked away, holding herself unnaturally erect, her head flung up proudly: that was the way real actresses walked, she was sure. Dementiev, completely bewitched, stood watching her for a long time, and then, pushing his hat back, went into the office.

As soon as the coast was clear, Anfissa retraced her steps at a run, slipped into the office building like a thief, and hurried into the safety of the telephone room.

The fat girl with the ear-rings, who had taken Nadya's place, was on duty.

“What's the excitement?” she asked, staring at Anfissa's flushed and smiling face.

“I've just met a man.”

“So what?”

“Nothing. . . .”

Anfissa took the Africa-shaped piece of mirror out of the desk drawer, held it for a while, and put it away again, forgetting to look at herself.

Tossia, the Irreplaceable

After failing so disgracefully the first day on the job, Gavrilovna took all the precautions she could think of not to let it happen a second time. She decorated the walls of the kitchen shed with two coloured posters, one said “WASH YOUR HANDS BEFORE MEALS”, and the other “FLIES CARRY DISEASE”. She now had a thumbed and greasy cookery book lying on the table, to which she constantly referred, moving her lips like a schoolchild, and whose instructions she followed to the letter.

In the meantime, Tossia had got herself a pair of padded trousers and wading through the deep snow presented no problem to her now. She was terribly stiff and sore, but she kept telling herself that the most difficult stage was over. In the course of her short life she had had all kinds of physical work to do: chopping wood, digging potatoes, cleaning cow sheds, and so forth. All this experience came in useful now, and she wielded her light,

razor-sharp little axe with the ease and jauntiness of a regular lumberjack.

She hoped Ilya would see that she was as good as her word and was already doing well at her new job. But he was so busy felling trees, he never looked her way once. His attitude puzzled Tossia: was he so busy fulfilling the plan, or was he afraid he had been too nice to her the day before? "Never mind, we'll settle this later," she thought.

She swung her gleaming axe to chop off a great big branch and suddenly noticed that it had been sawn off already. Ilya was working a little distance away with his back to her. She saw him fell a fir tree and before going on to the next one saw off all the thickest branches to make things easier for her.

At first Tossia believed this manoeuvre was lost on all but herself, but soon she noticed that the other girls had guessed who the trees with the sawn-off branches were meant for and gave them the miss.

"There's something behind this," Nadya, always sensitive to other people's happiness, said kindly.

"He's trying real hard," Tossia called back casually, so the girls would not think she was speechless with joy.

"Why is he doing it, Tossia, d'you know?" Katya asked innocently. "We've never seen anything like it here."

"Why the fuss?" Tossia said sharply. "A person's simply changing his ways little by little, working for the good of his team . . . he's trying to fulfill his plan."

"Don't tell us about his plan! He always overfulfills *that*!" Katya snickered.

Katya went on to the next tree, but Tossia was not to be left alone, it seemed. The usually reserved Nadya looked about her and then stole up to Tossia with a mysterious air.

"He's gone on you," she whispered.

"What if he is?" Tossia tossed her head, stamped her foot and sang into Nadya's face:

*He's gone on her, he's gone on her,
And she . . . and she . . .*

Tossia stamped her feet again and again but the verse simply refused to be composed because her felt boots got stuck in the snow and never reached firm ground or for some other reason.

"I'm no good at jingles today," she admitted contritely.

"What he sees in you, I don't know," Nadya said, critically appraising Tossia's looks.

"I like that!" Tossia ^{act} ~~feigned~~ anger to hide her hurt feelings. "I've a nice walk, and then . . . my eyes: one's on the left side of my face and the other's on the right. . ."

"You're just a chatterbox." Nadya sounded disappointed: she may have had an obscure hope that Tossia would tell her the secret of her success and teach her how to bag the town's best-looking chaps.

"And you're just an old maid," Tossia thought ^{viciously} viciously, but said nothing. Not that she was afraid of Nadya, no. She simply could not bring herself to hurt the poor old thing.

Was it really all right to let Ilya help her, Tossia began to wonder. She stood to gain by it of course: take the sharp little axe, for instance, or again the sawn-off branches. But on the other hand, if you looked at what was behind it. . . . What frightened her was that a few wretched branches might put her in debt to Ilya for ever after. And then, by accepting his help she was more or less admitting that this new job was too much for her to manage by herself. But whether it was or not, was not the point at all.

Ilya enjoyed helping her, she noticed that yesterday, and guessed somewhat ^{and from} vaguely that it gave him a special sort of pleasure she herself had never experienced. To her shame she felt nothing like *that* herself and suspected a trap somewhere.

She was crossing the threshold into a new, adult world and the novelty of it made her overcautious. She was afraid that in her inexperience she might give Ilya much more than he'd give her in return. Tossia was no schemer: all she wanted was to enter the adult world of Ilya, Katya and all the rest on equal terms.

Ilya, eager to help her, now trimmed off not just the difficult branches but all the twigs as well, which Tossia could have easily

chopped off at one blow. It was a long time since anyone had shown such concern for her.... If her childhood dream of a big brother had ever come true, this brother would have been like Ilya, she was quite sure. Perhaps not a spit and image of him, but he would certainly have been as strong and kind as Ilya, and maybe as good-looking.... After all, plain sisters have decent-looking brothers sometimes, don't they? Not as a rule, of course, and not too often either, but such things have been known to happen. Heredity was such a deep thing!

Tossia felt ashamed of her shabby thoughts. Why haggle over who'd give whom more? She detested misers. I'll do this for you if you'll do that for me, disgusting! "All right, let him help me if he likes," she decided magnanimously, well pleased that for all her shortcomings she was a generous, broad-minded person on the whole, and her big brother, if he were to come true, wouldn't think her a disgrace.

She lugged an armful of branches to the fire, and it so happened that Ilya approached it from the other side at exactly the same moment. He held an unlighted cigarette in his hand for all to see as an excuse.

"How are you getting along? Still battling with the firs?" he asked in a very friendly manner.

"I have to, it's a mixed forest, you know."

Ilya remembered explaining this to her the day before, and thought appreciatively: "Smart of her." Tossia looked at him with laughing eyes, and her expression said that she not only read all his thoughts but also knew his greatest secret, which he himself had no inkling of as yet. Ilya found himself somewhat put out by her jubilant gaze.

"What's on your mind?" he asked nervously.

"You know, you're one sort of person at the club dances and quite another in the forest," she told him trustingly.

"What d'you mean by that?" Ilya asked warily, ^Ususpecting a catch somewhere.

"More human. . . . It's no trouble at all looking at you."

"Look as much as you like, I don't mind."

Katya coughed a couple of times, as agreed. Tossia frowned but made no move. And then Katya, the true friend and Tossia's staunchest defender against her own self, got a terrible fit of whooping cough. Tossia waved her mitten angrily, acknowledging the warning.

"What's wrong with Katya?" Ilya asked.

"She's got appendicitis or bronchitis or something. . . . Look, don't saw off the twigs, I'm afraid my axe will go rusty."

"I like that!" Ilya exclaimed and strode off to his power saw.

Tossia saw him strike a match and light his cigarette. If he had matches all along, why did he have to come to the fire then? He was always up to some trick! He blew a puff of smoke; it slipped across the satiny whiteness of a birch tree like a greyish shadow and dived thievishly into the thick branches of a fir.

"A mixed forest it certainly is," Tossia muttered under her breath.

No, he wouldn't do for a big brother, she thought, but, strangely, without regret.

"Still re-educating him?" Katya asked sarcastically, flung a huge branch on the fire, and suddenly broke into song:

Maybe I'm a pretty girl. . . .

Tossia joined in shrilly, to tease Katya, the town's acclaimed soprano:

But my clothes are poor. . . .

Katya shook her fist at Tossia, as if to tell her not to spoil the wistfully lovely old song with her clowning. They sang on in harmony:

*No one wants to marry me,
What am I to do?*

The other girls joined in, all except Nadya, who went on working in silence, chopping the branches off with clean, strong blows, and lugging mountains of them to the fire. Her thoughts seemed to be miles away. She whacked at the branches with such savage fury as if she was working off on them her pent-up re-

sentment against life for cheating her of beauty and happiness. Obviously, the forest offered Nadya no release from those gloomy thoughts which had made her leave her telephone job.

* * *

Gavrilovna tasted her soup for the umpteenth and last time, nodded her head vigorously in approval, slammed shut her cookery book, and banged on the buffer, calling the lumberjacks to dinner.

"Let's see what she's got for us today," said Fil, getting served.

He took one spoonful of the cabbage soup, and dashed it out on the snow again. The other lumberjacks followed suit. The steaming cabbage leaves joined their frozen brothers of yesterday.

"It's no better than yesterday's."

"We want Tossia back!"

"It's a sheer waste!"

"We want Tossia!"

"You don't understand anything!" Gavrilovna shouted in self-defence, brandishing her cookery book. "I followed instructions to the letter, it's all in the book: the cabbage leaves are chopped the way the book says, and the carrots are sliced thin and star-shaped!"

"That's all there is to it—cabbage and carrots, but Tossia's soup had something," Vera said.

"It was all Sasha's and Ilya's doing," Katya called out. "Tossia's got to go back!"

The more far-sighted of the lumbermen produced bottles of milk.

"We made a bloomer, you know," Sasha whispered to Ilya.

"How were we to know?"

Ilya glanced at Tossia with new respect, and to his surprise found her prettier than he always thought.

"It's quite eatable," Tossia said, trying to be a good sport, shut her eyes tight and swallowed a spoonful.

"Oh, come off it, Tossia, you're just playing noble," Katya fumed.

Freezer leaned over Churkin and sang, drumming his spoon on the table:

*Please accept my resignation,
I don't like this job of mine. . . .*

"A nice fix," Churkin mumbled, and as always in moments of stress reached for the back of his head to scratch it, but Fil, who had come up behind him, caught his hand.

"See here, foreman, you've got to do something. I start belly-aching too when I'm hungry."

For the Common Good

Churkin sat facing Ignat Vasilyevich across his desk. Dementiev was studying the map of lumber transportation arteries nailed to the wall. As usual, Ignat Vasilyevich had the look of a man who had dropped into the office for a minute and had by mistake taken someone else's chair while waiting for the real boss to come in.

"I've talked to the married women and the girls both," Churkin reported. "No one wants to be cook. You remember what a fight there was for the job after the war, and now no one will take it. I don't know what to do. The whole thing beats me. . . ."

Ilya came in, pulling Tossia by the hand. Ignat Vasilyevich leapt to his feet with such ^{Chairman} alacrity as if it was the Chairman of the Economic Council himself who was honouring him with a call.

"The thing is, Comrade Kislitsina," he said brightly, pulling up a chair for Tossia. "You'll have to go back to your old job."

"I wouldn't dream of it!" With an air of stubborn defiance, Tossia ^{tugged} at the ends of her head kerchief, tightening the knot under her chin. "You haven't the right!"

Ignat Vasilyevich grunted in some embarrassment and looked at Dementiev out of the corner of his eye. He wanted to get it over and done with as soon as possible and also to impress it on the mind of the new engineer that this was no backwoods and directors of lumber camps were no boors.

"Don't fly off the handle, child," he tried to reason with her
"Try to understand this: you're only a slip of a girl, yet so many people are appealing to you. Your workmates and all of us...

Say you will, for goodness sake!"

"I'm not going back," Tossia held her ground. "You won't make me even if you all go for me together. I'll write to the newspaper about it!"

"Hold your horses for just one minute. . . . No one's going to force you. But try to give a thought to our lumber camp: our lumber output dropped by fourteen cubic metres yesterday, and by twenty-two today, all on account of that dinner trouble. If we go on at this rate we'll kill our quarterly plan because of you. Factories are running short of timber and we're failing them. Why? they'll ask. Because Tossia Kislitsina refuses to help, we'll say. They've started building a house, but now they can't get on with it. They're building a railroad across the desert, but now they're short of sleepers. Colliers have gone down into the mines to hew coal, but they've no pit-props, so they're just wasting time. . . . And all because of you!"

Tossia began to wilt under the vastness of the blame she was shouldered with, but she pulled herself together at once, angry at herself for falling so readily into Ignat Vasilyevich's rather primitive trap.

"Don't try any pep talks on me! I don't have to be told where our lumber is needed, I can read the wall newspaper, thank you. Why blame it all on me? Can I help it that my cabbage soup is good? I haven't been to any special school, I just cook it, taste it to see that there's enough salt, and season it with lots of onions. Anyone can do that if he's got the ingredients."

"Gavrilovna for one can't, and you know it," Ignat Vasilyevich put in quickly. "You've got a gift for it, Tossia, don't say you haven't."

"Some gift! What a thing to say!" Tossia smiled drily.

"It is a gift, a real gift," he assured her. "It's like Pushkin taking a clean sheet of paper and writing wonderful poetry on it: 'The woods are shedding their attire of gold', or, say, 'Alone amid the pines in forest deep, you've long awaited me'..."

He gave Dementiev a triumphant look. Tossia's first reaction was amazement: to think that their chief knew Pushkin so well! But then it struck her that both the lines were about the forest, and were perhaps compulsory for all the big shots in the timber industry.

"But if I try to do it," Ignat Vasilyevich picked up a clean piece of paper and waved it for greater effect, "I'll only produce some unreadable rubbish. Am I right?"

"I suppose you know best what you can produce," Tossia said evasively. "In other words, since I can make good cabbage soup I'm to be chained to the kitchen for the rest of my life, is that it? This cooking business makes some people think I'm a sort of subsidiary in everything. . . ."

Tossia flashed a glance at Ilya who sat twisting his deerskin cap, his eyes downcast. Dementiev walked across the room to join them. At first he was amused by his ~~corpulent~~ ^{stout} chief's earnestness and his bringing Pushkin into play to persuade the tiny cook to go back to her job, but then he got really interested in the conversation.

"May I?" he asked Ignat Vasilyevich, raising his hand from force of student habit. "Try to understand one thing, Comrade Kisseleva. . . ."

"Kislitsina is my name," Tossia corrected him touchily.

"I beg your pardon, Comrade Kislitsina. Try to understand one thing: we're going to relieve all women of physical work in the forest soon, we're working towards this. One against all, is that your idea? Against our entire policy on the question of female labour?"

This terrible accusation frightened Tossia. What if they kicked her out of here the way they had at the state farm, and never let her finish the highly important re-educational job she had taken on?

"She's not against anything," Ilya stood up for her. "She's no sense in her head yet, that's all."

"Don't judge others by yourself," she snapped at Ilya, and then turned to her superiors: "I don't insist on trimming trees, I'll do any job you say, but not cooking. I want to, how d'you say it, develop, learn a new skill, see?"

"Develop all you please," Ignat Vasilyevich said cheerfully. "If you're good we'll transfer you to the canteen and appoint you chef. . . . You've wonderful prospects!"

"I don't care for prospects of this kind," Tossia said stubbornly. "I'm not going to be a subsidiary all my life."

Ignat Vasilyevich scowled at Ilya. *frown*

"Where did you get the idea that cooking was a subsidiary job? Subsidiary, I like that! You've seen it for yourself: the lumbermen went without dinner and their output dropped at once. Cooking is no less important than logging, isn't it true?" he turned to Churkin.

"It's the most ^{best} important job there is," Churkin answered readily, smacking his lips. *deem*

"Who could have told you that rot about it being subsidiary?" Ignat Vasilyevich thundered, now that he knew her most vulnerable spot. "Tell me who it was and I'll give him what's coming to him for disorganising production!"

"Never mind who, it wasn't anyone in particular," Tossia said reluctantly, determined to die rather than tell.

Ignat Vasilyevich wiped the sweat off his face.

"Let her think it over," Ilya stood up for her again. "You can't expect her to agree right away. . . ."

Tossia looked gratefully at her only defender. Her next thought was that he was merely acting as any team leader would, anxious not to have his team depleted. And another thing: who'd he help if she left the branch-trimming job? Nadya wouldn't stand for it. Who was he trying so hard for?

"Why didn't you think before talking her into leaving the kitchen?" Ignat Vasilyevich turned on Ilya. "I'll get round to you and Sasha. A couple of bunglers! Well then, Tossia, how about it? A person can't always do what he wants to do, more often than not he does what's more useful to others. Bear that in mind. He has to. Understand?"

Tossia felt ashamed of herself for wasting so much of Ignat Vasilyevich's time, a man old enough to be her father. Irresolute again, she looked at Ilya, asking him with her eyes what to do. He was the team leader, after all, and had to give guidance. . . .

Ignat Vasilyevich turned away to let them negotiate undisturbed. Ilya spread out his hands and nodded, advising Tossia to agree.

"Well, if it is important and . . . for the common good . . . then, of course. . . ."

"Thank you, thank you," Ignat Vasilyevich was delighted, he gripped her hand with both of his and shook it. "Try your best now, the fellows need feeding up."

"I simply can't cook a bad dinner," she said contritely. "I can't help it, worse luck. . . . Only I refuse to work in that tumbledown shed any longer!"

"Well, you see, we'll finish felling in that area soon," Ignat Vasilyevich explained in a confidential tone of voice. "There's no sense in building anything lasting there now. It's not expedient, you see?"

Rooming with Vera, the correspondence student, Tossia had become quite used to high-sounding words, and they couldn't frighten her into giving ground.

"You should have built it earlier then, when it was, what d'you call it, expedient," Tossia said firmly.

Ilya ^{None of your business, with you!} chuckled approvingly, while Ignat Vasilyevich shifted his blotting pad quite unnecessarily and darted a quick look at Dementiev.

"Is it too cold working there? You can have a sheepskin coat from the warehouse if you like."

Tossia snorted, and then decided that being a person universally acclaimed as gifted, she had the right to treat them to a little lecture.

"You can't cook in sheepskins. It's not myself I'm worrying about at all, I'm tough. It's the potatoes that can't stand the cold. I wrap the bags as warmly as I can, but it's all no use. And besides, people are obliged to eat with their coats and hats on. It's against all the rules of hygiene. I read about it in the paper: they've got some special trailer canteens, they can be sent anywhere like trains. They're here today and there tomorrow. If we had one of those. . . ."

"Winter will be over before we can hope to get one," Churkin spoke from experience.

"At least try," Tossia advised him. "It'll come in useful next year, this is not the last winter here."

"Teaching your grandmother to suck eggs! Nice doings!" Churkin grumbled.

"Yes, I've seen those trailer canteens, they're divided in two: kitchen and dining room," Dementiev supported Tossia's idea.

Ignat Vasilyevich refused to fight.

"All right, we'll see what can be done," he said, and shifted his blotting pad again.

Dementiev nodded in answer to Tossia's unspoken question, promising her to protect her potatoes and stand up for hygiene.

"It's all agreed then. Good-bye," Tossia said.

She left the room and started down the corridor. She knew that Ilya had followed her out, though she had not turned to see, and hurried on so he wouldn't think she was waiting for him. Let him catch up with her if he wanted to.

"That brat's the very devil!" Ignat Vasilyevich said to Dementiev and mopped his neck. "She's made me sweat. . . . Now you know what I've got to cope with, and you talk of modernising our methods. . . ."

Tossia and Ilya paused on the porch. Ilya had a feeling that Tossia was expecting him to thank her. And he honestly wanted to say something nice to her. But he so rarely felt grateful to anyone, he could actually count the people he had ever thanked on the fingers of one hand, and there was no girl among them, so he simply did not know how to do it.

People could keep their thanks as far as Tossia was concerned, but having agreed to help out the lumber camp with all its tractors, power saws, stacks of timber, lumbermen and bosses, she did want to hear something from Ilya, even if it was only one word "Thanks". That wouldn't put his tongue out of joint, you'd think! All right, if he felt no personal gratitude, he could at least thank her on behalf of the team; surely they must be sick and tired of the slops Gavrilovna gave them.

"What a pity I tore up my pretty pictures," Tossia said, generously offering Ilya a chance to collect his wits.

Silently, Ilya felt in his pockets for his cigarettes. Smokers had all the breaks! At the slightest hitch they'd light up. While they looked for their cigarettes and matches, struck a match, lighted up and inhaled, the worst would be over. They weren't doing anything that mattered, but they were doing something at least. The lucky devils!

Not being a smoker, Tossia had to just stand there like a graven image. Enviously she watched Ilya knead his cigarette; yes, of course, you could also knead it for a full minute, and then tap it for as long as you liked on your matchbox or your thumb-nail, whichever you preferred.

"Don't start imagining things," she said stiffly. "I didn't agree to go back because of you, I did it for the common good. It *had* to be done, understand?"

"I wasn't imagining anything," Ilya replied sulkily, tapping his cigarette on his thumb-nail.

So his preference was a thumb-nail. . . .

"That's fine," Tossia said, and hurried down the steps without waiting for Ilya to strike a match and light up.

A New Broom

Churkin was showing Dementiev round the lumber camp.

The young engineer scolded Churkin for whatever shortcomings he saw with all the fervour of a person on his first responsible job.

"And if you don't clear all this away, you'll be asking for trouble!" he fumed, kicking a log partly buried under snow.

"A new broom sweeps clean, of course," Churkin muttered.

They now reached Tossia's lop-sided little hut, or, rather, crudely boarded-up shed. Snow falling in the night had covered up the disgusting cabbage leaves, and there was nothing there to show that Tossia had been away trying her hand at a new job. And once again, as in pre-Gavrilovna days, a tantalising smell poured from the kitchen.

"What's in that shack?" Dementiev asked, his mouth watering. "Surely it can't be the kitchen?"

"It is," Churkin looked away from the ugly thing, and added: "It's only a branch."

"I thought that girl was just making things difficult, but whoever's responsible for this structure is a criminal. Why, it's a disgrace to the whole lumber town!" Dementiev raged.

Churkin scratched the back of his head.

"That may be so, but there's a good side to it too. No one uses a full lunch hour, they all go back to work the minute they've finished eating."

"It certainly isn't inviting!"

"That's what I say," Churkin hastened to agree. "Ours is a hardy lot, and then there are the fires of course. . . ."

"Fires!" Dementiev spat the word out with venom, and strode off to the nearest tractor.

He counted all the chokers and tried the revolving crane. Behind his hypercritical attitude one could sense the timidity of a newly hatched engineer. He swore, long before graduation, that the section entrusted to him would be a model of efficiency, but now that he was actually in charge he did not know where to begin and tried to do everything at once.

"Comrade engineer," Katya called to him. "A rocket's been launched to the moon, and here we are, still tapping away with our axes. It's not so bad in summer, but in winter with all this wading through the snow we all look like the Snowman and not females at all. And the moment we get home we just collapse, it's come to where we want to give up evening school."

"Go easy on the spooning at night," Churkin said, with an eye on the new boss.

"Thanks for your advice, I'll use it when I've lived to your age," Katya said cheekily and then turned gravely to Dementiev: "Something's got to be done, comrade engineer. Use your engineer's imagination."

Fil, who was making fast the chokers a little distance away, listened with pleasure to the way Katya was giving the new boss a piece of her mind. While Katya spoke, Dementiev kept shifting his position so as not to have to look at the blazing fire.

"No imagination is needed here, everything has been invented

ages ago. We'll join forces and put an end to these primitive methods," he said.

"I'm with you!" Katya said eagerly. "Why do you keep turning away from the fire? Is the smoke getting into your eyes?"

"I can't stand the sight of those millions going up in smoke!" he said savagely.

"Why jump on me?" Katya demanded. "I only do what I'm told."

"I'm not blaming you," Dementiev said, and walked away from the fire.

"Something tells me we're in for plenty of trouble with him in charge," Longlegs said apprehensively.

"It's those intellectuals who make the worst slave-drivers, I tell you," Freezer added.

"No, there's something else in this," Sasha suggested.

A jolly clanging came floating over the trees. Tossia was hammering on the buffer for all she was worth and singing out: "Dinnertime! Come on, lumberjacks! Hur-ry!"

On their way to the upper depot, Dementiev and Churkin dropped into Tossia's shack again. The lumbermen were busy eating.

"Would you like to eat with us?" Churkin invited the engineer.

The lumbermen made room for Dementiev at the table. The ladle in Tossia's hand spooned up the juiciest pieces for Dementiev, without her volition or permission. However, she noticed its sycophantic intentions at once, threw the catch back into the pot, and served him a plate of the thinnest soup, nothing but cabbage water really.

Ilya threw an armful of firewood at Tossia's feet.

"Here you are," he said morosely, carefully avoiding her eyes.

"Why d'you bother? I don't need any help here, you know."

"It's a habit with me now. . . . Have you ever heard about a thing called conditioned reflex?"

Tossia's eyes popped.

"Isn't it monkeys who have it?"

"So I'm a monkey. Thanks."

"Oh, Ilyushka, I didn't mean that!"

"What d'you call me? Say it again."

"Ilyushka . . . why?"

"It's not exactly a pet name, but you make it sound very nice."

"I've that sort of voice," Tossia said meekly.

Dementiev thoroughly enjoyed Tossia's famous cabbage soup.

"I thought people were exaggerating, but she's really a wonderful cook!" he said in a loud, ringing voice, as though addressing a meeting.

"The cook at the student's canteen didn't exactly spoil you, poor chap!" Tossia thought, and regretted giving him nothing but cabbage water.

"It's a gift, that's what it is!" Dementiev announced.

"It is!" Churkin echoed, wondering whether he'd get away with a reprimand this time or whether the young engineer would make an issue of it.

Tossia raised an angry clatter with her ladle and lids, a scowl on her face.

"What's up?" Ilya asked, moving up in line for his dinner.

"They're making fun of me. . . . Others have a gift for dancing, singing, inventing engines and things, and I've got this!" She kicked a pot viciously, hurt her toe and grimaced with pain. "Oh, why must I have all the bad luck!"

Anfissa Goes in for Self-Criticism

To while away the time, Anfissa had called up Marussia, the telephone girl at the nearest lumber camp, and was telling her the latest news.

"No, I've got no intention of settling down yet. . . . Our new engineer? He's strict, they say. . . . Chase your own engineer, and leave ours alone! Yes, we've got crepe-soled shoes at our store here too. . . ."

For a whole year now Anfissa had chatted with Marussia practically every day, but she had never seen her. Anfissa had long ago decided that Marussia must be like Katya, not the way Katya was now, but the way she'd be after she had been married to Sasha

for a couple of years and had seen the seamy side of married life.

And so she was idly chatting with Marussia, listing for her, between yawns, what they had on sale at the shop, when the door opened and in walked Dementiev.

"You here?" he gasped.

Anfissa quickly hung up.

"Yes, you see . . ." she said apologetically with a vague motion of her hand. "I don't know what made me tell you I was an actress. I'm terribly sorry, Vadim Petrovich."

"Oh, it's all right, it's quite all right!" Dementiev was delighted. "It's wonderful that you're working here and don't have to . . . what did you call it? . . . get any sort of atmosphere. What matters is that you don't have to leave! But you've got talent, there's no doubt of that. Look how you took me in!" He shook his head in admiration, recalling their meeting. "What I came for is this: I wonder if you could type something for me? The secretary is ill, and I'm no good, I peck with one finger. Like a woodpecker!" He showed how he did it.

"Of course I will, gladly," Anfissa readily agreed. "I used to type everything for our old engineer. Only, there's that . . ." she indicated the switchboard with a nod.

"I'll bring the typewriter here. There's a way out of everything, you know!"

The moment he left the room, Anfissa got out her mirror, quickly fixed her hair and rubbed off some of her lipstick.

Dementiev brought an old Underwood and put it down on her table.

"What d'you want me to type?" Anfissa asked coolly, putting in a sheet of paper.

"Address it to the Chief Engineer of the Timber Trust, and then go on with what's here."

Dementiev placed his rough draft in front of Anfissa. She smiled at his large schoolboyish writing, and started banging away.

"You do type well!" Dementiev said admiringly. "Have you. . ."

"Yes, I've been a typist too. . . . There's not much I haven't been, Vadim Petrovich."

Anfissa glanced up at him without pausing in her typing.

"I can't make out your writing here," she said.

Dementiev bent over her and read out the text.

"It says: 'A radical change in our logging and hauling methods is very long overdue'."

Anfissa typed even faster. Dementiev paced the room and tried not to stare at her, but his eyes sought her again and again against his will. He told himself he was merely admiring her efficiency and that her looks had nothing to do with it.

The telephone rang.

"Answer it, will you," Anfissa asked him.

Dementiev obeyed her with alacrity.

"They want the sleeper-cutting mill."

"Plug it in there," Anfissa said pointing, and watching his fumbling attempts she recalled the efficiency with which Ilya always did it. "Not in there! Honestly, you can't do a thing, and you an engineer!" Anfissa got up, but before making the connection, said gently: "Have I offended you?"

"Oh no, heavens no!" Dementiev said as happily as if she had just complimented him on his work.

Wouldn't Churkin be surprised if he could see Dementiev now! The stern, fault-finding chief engineer was no more, and in his place stood a shy, rather sheepish young man with no worldly wisdom whatsoever.

"Take it easy, there's no fire," Anfissa spoke into the mouthpiece as she plugged in.

"Really! Can't they wait for half a minute!" Dementiev was fully on Anfissa's side. "They're not making your job any easier for you, are they!"

Anfissa went back to her typing. She sincerely enjoyed doing it for him. There was something new in her, a sort of subdued excitement. She terribly wanted to charm Dementiev, but somehow she could not flirt with him in her usual, rather vulgar way.

Dementiev was tired of trying to master his emotions. He stood beside Anfissa now and stared at her with frankly admiring eyes. Anfissa knew he was looking at her, but she had not the courage to raise her head and meet his gaze. She typed faster and faster,

as if she were trying to run away from him, frightened by that new and uninvited something that was coming into her life. For once she seemed to forget she was a glamour girl, and there was even a hint of shyness in her manner.

Anfissa banged out the last word, and pulled the page out with a flourish.

"Thanks awfully," Dementiev said. "It's so neat! I'd never have managed. . . . There's just one slip you and I have made here, 'inasmuch' is one word, you know. It's just a typing error, of course, what with the hurry and everything," he added quickly, with a nod at the switchboard.

"No, it isn't a typing error, Vadim Petrovich," Anfissa said very seriously as though the matter concerned something infinitely more important than her spelling mistake. "It's simply that . . . when I was in school I was more interested in having fun than learning things."

Dementiev was quick to find an excuse for her.

"After all, in the case of a telephone operator or an . . . actress poor spelling is not a mortal sin, you know! Don't you agree? Now if you were a schoolteacher, for instance, it would have been an entirely different matter." He concluded with conviction: "Don't let it worry you, you're a wonderful girl just the same!"

"You say that to all the girls, I'm sure!" she said with her usual breeziness. She looked into his honest face that seemed wide open and innocent of all guile, and admitted impulsively: "I'm not so wonderful, really."

She regretted the impulse at once: why should she expose her true self? The telephone rang.

"Do you like skiing?" Dementiev asked, catching her hand as she reached for the receiver. "Let it ring. . . . Let's go skiing on Sunday, shall we? Show me the country round here, after all you've got to help the new engineer to get to know his forest."

"All right," Anfissa said, trying to reach for the receiver. "But you've got to know that it isn't done here. You might start people talking."

"Let them talk! You're not afraid, are you?"

Anfissa shook her head.

"It's a date then."

Dementiev took the typewriter away. With the smile still on her face, Anfissa picked up the receiver at last.

"Yes, Marussia, just a second," she said with a shade of apology in her voice which had never been there before. "Please don't be mad, if you only knew. . . ."

Ilya Wants to Study

"Is this the seventh form?"

Ilya stood in the doorway and gazed curiously about the cramped classroom. The blackboard still had on it the scribbings of the children who studied there in the day-time. Overage pupils now sat proudly at the low desks. Ilya knew all the girls and chaps very well, he saw them every day at work, and yet there was a difference about them that he could not quite explain. Even Fil, the notorious rowdy, looked more like a naughty boy showing off in front of the quiet goody-goodies.

He saw Tossia sitting at the back of the room, but did not look at her. He didn't want her to imagine that he had come to school because of her and get too swollen-headed.

"It is. The superior seventh!" Fil called out. "Have you decided to study in your old age?"

"I want to polish up on the theory. . . ."

"Take any one of the vacant seats," Fil said.

Without looking at Ilya, Tossia moved over, making room for him beside her. He squeezed in with some difficulty. His mood became attuned to the schoolroom atmosphere at once, and he very much suspected that he, too, looked like a diligent pupil.

"We've got a new pupil!" Fil announced to the maths teacher the moment she entered the room.

"But why in the middle of term?"

"Because, you see . . ." Ilya began to explain.

"Stand up," Tossia hissed at him. "Don't you know?"

Ilya looked at her with a puzzled frown and noticed that her eyes were round with fear.

"Stand up! Stand up!" everyone prompted him, seeing that he had forgotten all the school rules.

He got to his feet reluctantly.

"I finished seven-year school before I did my military service. I just want to refresh my memory, and go on to the eighth form in the autumn."

"Good. Sit down," the teacher said. "Now, who's going to answer today. . . ."

Her eyes swept the classroom.

All the animation went out of the pupils' faces as if by magic. The teacher's gaze came to rest on Tossia, but the girl looked at her so imploringly and clenched her hands with such an eloquent plea, that she took pity on her

"Kislitsina answered the other day, so let us ask Comrade Spiridonov to come up to the blackboard."

Fil groaned and walked to the blackboard like a doomed man. The girls in the front row started whispering and giggling with quick looks at Ilya. Tossia moved away a bit, sorry now that she had let him sit beside her, and fumbled with the lock on her brief case, which simply refused to open. Ilya watched her silent battle curiously.

"Why did you have to come?" she hissed at him in a pet. "As it is we see each other in the forest every day. Isn't that enough?"

"Can't I study if I want to?"

"Stop pretending. I hate liars!" she said in a sibilant whisper, despising him for all his wiles that anyone could see through.

She shifted to the very edge of the seat and attacked the stubborn lock with redoubled fury. Ilya helpfully pressed the lock very gently, and it flew open with obedient eagerness.

"No one asked you to!" Tossia grumbled, took out a thick exercise book and started writing in it, half turning away from Ilya.

"How you fly! You'd make a good stenographer," Ilya said.

Being a generous soul, Tossia tore out a double page and put it in front of Ilya. With a heavy sigh, he searched first in one pocket, then in another, and produced a small stump of a pencil.

Tossia immediately took the ugly thing away, a disgrace to an evening school pupil, and gave him instead a new pencil, sharpened to a point. With another grief-laden sigh, Ilya took the pencil and wrote at the top of the page: "Lesson One".

Nadya, Xan Xanich and Furniture

Vera had a huge sheet of paper for the wall newspaper spread out on the table, and was busy drawing a caricature of Churkin taking a snooze in the lair of a bear. Nadya had just come indoors with an armful of stiffly frozen washing. Katya was darning a stocking which she had stretched over a burnt-out lamp bulb. Anfissa, fully dressed, was lying on her bed and staring at the ceiling.

Tossia flew into the room, her cheeks rosy from the cold, and made straight for the stove to warm her hands over it.

"It does nip, the good old frost!" she said, and then took a letter out of her pocket and waved it in the air. "Mummy Vera, it's registered!"

Vera held out her hand for it.

"Nothing doing! Not unless you do a little dance first!"

"She doesn't know how," Nadya said harshly.

"What's there to know?" Tossia stamped her foot for inspiration, danced about the room and sang out her new jingle:

*I've a letter, it's for you
In an envelope of blue,
Do a little dance or two
And I'll . . .*

Before she could finish, Nadya snatched the envelope away from her and handed it to Vera. After one glance at the writing, Vera strode to the stove and threw it into the fire.

"Oh, Vera!" Tossia looked at her aghast. It still shocked her that Vera burned her letters without reading them.

"From your husband?" Katya asked softly, well aware that the question would cause pain, yet quite unable to master her burning curiosity.

Vera nodded curtly in answer, and bent over her drawing.

"You should see what lovely new wrist watches they've got at the store!" Tossia said enthusiastically to divert the girls' attention from Vera. "Tiny little ones with thick glass. . . ."

"I've seen them," Katya said crossly. "The price is pretty thick too."

Tossia dashed some tea into a cup and looked over Vera's shoulder at her drawing.

"That's right, let him have it! Gosh, Mummy Vera, you're a wizard at drawing bears!"

"A little verse would go well with it . . . make one up, Tossia, will you?" Vera asked her.

"I can't make them to order," Tossia said apologetically, little suspecting that she was merely repeating the words of many poets before her.

Nadya put a log on the fire, disturbing the ashes of Vera's letter.

"You're too hard on him, Vera. He is your husband, after all," Nadya said.

"So what?" Tossia put in between gulps of tea. "The way I see it, it's like this: once you've parted it's for good, and none of your stupid letter writing!"

"Must you butt in when grownups are talking?" Nadya said to her sternly. "We'll manage this without you, thank you."

"I'll keep mum," Tossia twisted her fingers into a lock and hung it on her lips. "How people love to bully, they wouldn't miss the chance for jam!"

To everyone's amazement, Tossia got all her books out of her shabby brief case and sat down to do her homework without being told.

"Knowledge is light and ignorance is darkness!" she quoted solemnly.

Vera and Katya exchanged worried looks, alarmed by Tossia's sudden diligence.

"Two trains left their respective stations," she muttered.

Vera was so amazed that she broke her promise never to do Tossia's homework for her again.

"Here, let me help you," she said compassionately.

Tossia gladly pushed her exercise book towards Vera, but retrieved it at once.

"I'll do it myself. . . . It never used to worry me, but I'm sort of ashamed now to stand up in front of the class and look dumb. . . . I wonder why, Mummy Vera?"

"You must be growing up."

"There's logic in that!" Tossia said in the tone of her maths teacher.

"Ahem, ahem!" came from Katya. "Stop quibbling, Tossia! It's because Ilya's there that you don't want to look dumb!" she said accusingly.

Tossia thought this over for a minute or two.

"Well, there's logic in that too. I don't want the brute to gloat." She turned to the sum again, muttering: "Two trains coming from opposite directions. . ." She raised her head for a moment and, true to her old habit of commenting out loud on her sums, said disgustedly: "And never collided, blast them!"

Tossia sat with her back to Anfissa so she wouldn't have to look at her and keep remembering that Ilya had once had an affair with her. The fact remained though, whether she remembered or not. Tossia wasn't going to worry her head about their shameful doings, why on earth should she care? What rotten luck that she had to room with Anfissa and have the bed next to hers. It was the caretaker's fault entirely. Couldn't that long-legged devil have put her in another room? Sure, she wouldn't have made friends with Vera, Nadya and Katya then. . . . Honestly, what a life: this way it's bad and that way it's worse! ♪

Vera finished her drawing, lay down on her hammock-bed and picked up a book. She did not begin to read at once though, worried by Nadya's morose attitude, as she sat on her bed staring stonily at the floor.

"Why aren't you making supper, Nadya? Xan Xanich will be here soon."

"Supper? Oh, yes, supper," Nadya said, coming out of her stupor.

She looked for her knife to peel the potatoes with, but it was gone.

"What have you done with my knife, Tossia?" she demanded.

Tossia, who was diligently scratching away with her pen, waved her left hand to say that she had never touched it and that she'd be obliged if they'd let her do her homework in peace. Without saying a word, Anfissa offered her knife to Nadya, the precious knife she had never let any of them borrow before.

"Thanks, I can hardly believe it's you, Anfissa," Nadya said, taking the knife.

"Anfissa, you'll be late to work if you don't hurry," Vera said, without looking up from the page.

Without uttering a word, Anfissa put on her street clothes and left.

"What's the matter with her?" Nadya asked.

"She's got her eye on the engineer," Katya explained. "She thinks she'll catch him if she acts quiet-like."

"Will she get him in her clutches, too?" Nadya threw the potato she was peeling into the pot and missed.

"He's already swallowed the bait," Katya said, and pushed the lamp bulb down into another stocking.

There was a soft knock on the door. Tossia, true to habit, raised her head and actually opened her mouth to sing out her pet phrase: "Come in, if you're so polite!" but changed her mind and returned to her sum, proud of herself for resisting so strong a temptation.

"Come in," Nadya called out.

The door opened a little way and Xan Xanich slipped in, carrying a brand-new stool he had made himself.

"There!" he announced triumphantly, placing the stool in the middle of the room for all to see. "Nadya and I are getting our room furnished, bit by bit."

Tossia could not sit still any longer. She jumped to her feet and examined the stool very thoroughly. This "piece of furniture" was neat, sturdy, and painted a bright green. Xan Xanich had

thought of everything, he had even cut out a crescent-shaped hole in the seat so one could easily pick it up and move it about the room.

"Gosh, you're clever, Xan Xanich! I couldn't make a stool like this if my life depended on it!" Tossia gushed, tracing the crescent-shaped slit with her finger.

"Try sitting on it," Xan Xanich said, beaming.

Tossia flopped down on it to please the kind old chap.

"Well?"

"I could sit on it all my life and never get up! I suppose a stool like this costs the whole of twenty rubles?"

"Try and buy one for twenty!" Xan Xanich said huffily. "You couldn't get one for twenty-five!"

Xan Xanich carried the stool to "their" corner and before putting it down gently squeezed Nadya's arm above the elbow with a familiarity permissible to a future husband.

"Supper's late, I'm afraid," Nadya said contritely, and busied herself at the stove.

"Never mind, Nadya dear, I'm not hungry at all."

He straightened a picture on the wall and sat down on his stool with the mysterious air of a person bearing important tidings.

"They were saying in the office that all the carpenters will be switched back to the building job. . . . It's that engineer." Xan Xanich dropped his voice: "I personally think he's one of the new sort. . . ."

Nadya grasped his meaning at once and nodded in agreement.

As a matter of fact, Xan Xanich was not as simple as some people thought him. Although he seemed so meek and mild and never pushed himself forward, he had an opinion all his own about everything that happened in the world. Only very occasionally, when the happening was much too involved and far away from the lumber town, would he admit in his soft voice that he could not judge from that distance, he needed a closer look.

Needless to say, he had his own opinion of all the bosses he had ever come across in his life. For his personal convenience he divided all the big and small bosses he knew into the old and the new. He mildly criticised the old and favoured

the new, approving of the difficult road they had chosen to embark on and hoping they would succeed and, what was more important still, never stray back to the beaten path of the "old" bosses.

The age of the bosses had nothing to do with it. Xan Xanich had known bosses of no more than twenty whom he nevertheless dumped with the "old". And again, there were men of sixty and over who definitely belonged with the "new".

A smart appearance, self-assurance, the highest of higher educations, a glib tongue, and even efficiency were things that carried little weight with Xan Xanich. What mattered was *where* the man was *aiming*, who he was working for, whether himself or ordinary people like themselves, people who had entrusted the boss with a rubber stamp—Xan Xanich's idea of a boss was a man with a rubber stamp—and had given him the right to issue orders.

Xan Xanich, who was a good hand at any job himself, gave highest marks to those of the bosses who besides issuing orders were also skilled at some unbosslike job, say felling trees, smelting steel or tilling land. Xan Xanich had the greatest confidence in bosses of this sort because he held that one working man would never let another working man down.

Hearing Dementiev shout at Churkin, Xan Xanich decided to put him down with the "old" bosses. However, the moment he learnt that Dementiev had persuaded Ignat Vasilyevich to put all the carpenters back on the job of completing the house where he and Nadya were to have a room, he instantly transferred him to the category of "new" bosses.

True, it was too early in the day for Dementiev to consider himself "made". Xan Xanich had all sorts of specimens in his rich collection of bosses: some began their careers as the newest of the new, only to join the ranks of the old in no time, and become more muscle-bound than the ones who had been "old" from the outset without ever making an effort to get out of the rut.

It must be said that the meek Xan Xanich considered these thoughts of his terribly daring. Far from thrusting his opinion on others, he took great pains to hide his thoughts from everyone.

At meetings, Xan Xanich always sat in a far corner,

listening to the speakers attentively and prudently keeping quiet. Nor did he ever criticise anyone's work in the wall newspaper.

Nadya was the only person with whom he shared his secret thoughts, for he already looked upon her as his wife, and husband and wife, he believed, should have no secrets from one another. Perhaps the reason why Xan Xanich was so keen on becoming a married man was that he was tired of storing his thoughts away in his own mind and, in his old age, wanted to have a patient and loyal listener always on hand.

"I've been thinking, Nadya dear, that if our new engineer continues the way he's started, we'll invite him to our wedding. Shall we?"

"I don't mind," Nadya said, slicing potatoes into the frying pan. "Let him come."

Tossia finished her sum, looked up the answer and to her astonishment found that it agreed exactly with the one she had managed to scrape up out of a jumble of figures, a thing she had never hoped to achieve.

"Why, these sums are simple if you do them," Tossia gladly shared her discovery with her room-mates. "At this rate, I'll get to the top of the class one day! Think of that!"

"If someone took you in hand, you'd grow up to be quite a decent person," Vera said in the tone of a mentor. "You've got the makings of one."

"I like that! So I'm not a decent person now?"

"The good and the bad is all mixed up in you," Vera said. "Offhand, I couldn't say which you've got more of."

"Oh no, I object!" Tossia was up in arms at once. "You can't saw a living person in two: I'll take the top half, wrap it up please, and throw the rest away. The way I see it is like this: all the good in me belongs to me and so does all the bad, what can I do since it's there? So take me the way I am, the whole thing, and keep the change!"

"Now she's off," Katya grumbled.

She couldn't stand Tossia's speeches, because they made her look brighter than herself and everyone saw it.

However, Katya recovered her balance when she started making her bed. One glance at her mountain of lovely soft pillows and then a look at Tossia's one and only flat, lumpy cushion, stuffed with coarse cotton wool, restored her sense of superiority at once. Imagine minding a poor girl who obviously had no hope of ever owning pillows like hers!

"Xan Xanich, don't look!" Katya called out in a cheery voice.

"Aye, aye, sir!" Xan Xanich answered and turned to face the wall.

Of its own accord his hand reached into his pocket for the knife he always brought along with him. Since the lower seams were all done, he had to climb on to his new stool, first spreading an old newspaper on it, to attend to the tow oozing between the logs higher up.

Dementiev Asks the Echo

Anfissa followed an old ski-track, and Dementiev skied beside her along the undisturbed snow. The wild forest, untouched by man, made way for them and revealed to them its greatest secrets. The going was easy, the pure white snow sparkled cheerfully in the sun, and the frost was peaceably inclined that day: there was only a tiny nip in the air, the cold would not let them stand still, but it left them alone when they were in motion, and merely made their lips numb and turned their breathing to vapour.

"There are cranberries galore here," Anfissa said in the business-like voice of a guide showing the local sights to a newcomer. "See that hollow over there, that's the place to go mushrooming. . . . If you marry here your wife will pickle barrels and barrels of mushrooms for you."

"Oh, lovely!" Dementiev cried happily, and from sheer joy of living took a whack at the nearest fir tree with his stick.

A branch, high up, sagging under its burden of snow, trembled and shook off some of its load. Dementiev threw back his head and let the snow sprinkle his flushed face.

"I love it here," he said, catching up with Anfissa. "Pity I

didn't know about this lumber town before. And what's this spot famous for?"

"For its queer echo. Listen." Anfissa stopped and shouted: "Hey!"

Sick of its enforced idleness, the echo gladly picked up her shout and carried it away, repeating it again and again until it was heard no more. Dementiev also gave a shout and listened. His shout sped after Anfissa's, caught up with it in the heart of the forest far away, and there blended with it.

They climbed to the top of a small hill and paused. With a sweeping motion of his hand, Dementiev invited Anfissa to admire the wonderful view of the taiga under snow.

"Not bad, eh? Isn't it simply asking to be painted!"

Anfissa looked about her very conscientiously. Truth to tell, she had never been able to understand why people went into such raptures at the sight of some scenery, a wispy cloud in the sky or a crimson sunset. And as for admiring a forest, that was quite beyond her. The taiga was her home, she had seen thousands and thousands of trees in her life both in summer and in winter, in daylight and at night, and so to her the forest, in all its moods and guises, was a thing too familiar and commonplace to rate admiration.

But now she wanted to try and see the forest as Dementiev saw it.

Winter had decked out all the trees in fluffy white caps, bent the frozen branches, and covered the needles with hoarfrost, missing not a one. A thick young fir-grove, casting smudged blue shadows on the snow, was chilly and uninviting, but the pines seemed to breathe warmth. It was as if their bronze trunks had absorbed all the sunlight they could in the summer, and now it glowed through the thin, scaly bark. An invisible woodpecker gave a tentative peck or two and then grew still, unwilling to disturb the solemn silence.

Anfissa was sure that given a little longer she too, would begin to appreciate the beauty of the forest hitherto hidden from her. But suddenly she had a creepy feeling that the forest was also looking at her. It could see her through and through, she felt, it

could see the whole of her sinful, sordid past which she so wanted to conceal from Dementiev.

"Come on, it's cold standing here," she said, and skied down the hill.

Dementiev overtook her in the hollow below.

"You're jolly good on skis, I'd give you the first sports rating for it!"

"If all people were as kind as you! I belong here, you know . . . I was born near here."

"Funny," Dementiev said, thinking aloud. "I keep imagining that you've come here from a long way away," he paused for a minute, and then blurted out: "You're a princess out of a fairy-tale."

"A princess?" she laughed.

"A real one. I've never met anyone like you."

Anfissa did not know how to take it, what to say?

"Oh, go on, Vadim Petrovich! D'you expect me to believe that?" she cried, reverting to her customary flirtish tone. "You never met one in Leningrad? Why, I bet there are princesses like me selling soft drinks on every street corner. . . . You're a fast one, I can tell!"

Dementiev halted abruptly as though he had tripped on level ground. Anfissa stopped too, and gave him a frightened, guilty look. She was finding it more and more difficult to find the right tone with him. Instinct told her she must not treat him the way she usually treated Ilya and her other men friends, but exactly how she should behave with him she did not know.

"Did you mean that?" his voice was troubled. "How little you know me! Oh, I know, let's put my words to the test." He took a deep breath, turned to face the forest and shouted: "Have I ever met one or not?"

The echo took its time before it answered: "Or-not . . . not . . . not . . ."

"Did you hear that?" Dementiev was jubilant. "The echo never lies!"

Anfissa quickly averted her eyes.

"You funny person," she said.

She pushed off. A tender, grateful and faintly condescending smile, quite strange to her, touched the corners of her lips.

They came to a frozen river. On the opposite bank there were stacks of logs ready for rafting.

"What place is that?" Dementiev asked. "Can it be our town?"

"None other," Anfissa said without a smile, seeming to come down to earth. "I'll race you!"

She turned off the old ski-track and sped away from the river, with Dementiev following.

* * *

It was late afternoon when they got home. In front of the hostel porch, Anfissa unbuckled her skis and shook off the snow. Petya Churkin came hopping down the street, swinging a string bag with the mermaid-like tail of a large cod sticking out at the top. Dementiev picked up the boy and held him high in the air.

"Let me go," Petya yelled and tried to swipe his face with the tail of the fish.

"Not until you've told me your name!"

"I don't want to talk to you, you gave my Daddy trouble."

"Oh, then you're young Churkin!"

"I didn't say I was. . . . Let go, you bureaucrat, you!"

Dementiev laughed in high delight, and let the youngster go.

"That's what the Churkins call me at home, did you hear that, Anfissa?" He called out to Petya: "Come and see me, I'll give you some picture books to read."

In response to this kind invitation, Petya made a snowball and threw it at Dementiev, hitting him between the shoulders.

"No sissy, that!" Dementiev said appreciatively, shuddering from the blow. "I love children, don't you?"

The question took Anfissa unawares.

"Not too much . . . they're a nuisance. . . ."

"Oh, no! They're wonderful little chaps!" Dementiev said, disagreeing with Anfissa for the first time.

On Board the "Cuckoo" Train

The fires were burning down. The sun was setting, tinting the snow with every colour imaginable. The trees cast such long shadows that it was difficult to tell which shadow belonged to what tree.

The lumberjacks were hurrying to catch the "cuckoo" train. Tossia was used to having Ilya walk with her every evening, it was only after boarding the train that they did not always manage to be together. But this evening he left her half-way and rushed ahead for some unknown reason.

The engine driver gave a long whistle to greet the lumberjacks. They rushed to the train to grab the best "seats". Ilya was the first to reach it and leap on to the brake platform.

"It's booked," he fended off all attacks. "Hey, Tossia, come this way!"

Tossia came up and asked haughtily: "What d'you want?"

"Climb in, it's a first-class compartment!"

Ilya held out a hand. Tossia hesitated and looked about her. Those who had not made the brake platforms were scrambling up the stacked logs and settling down on top of them. Katya and Sasha were sitting high above Ilya's head, facing away from the engine, and now, as at a signal, they both turned up the collars of their jackets at once. It had struck Tossia quite some time ago that married or engaged couples mostly acted like one being. She made fun of Katya for this loss of independence, but in her heart of hearts she envied her for being so completely at one with her pigeon-toed Sasha.

"Come on, it's too windy up there!" Ilya said, giving her a hand.

The little engine puffed hard to get the heavy train moving. Vera came hurrying out of the office shed and ran after it, holding down her shoulder-strap bag as it knocked against her side.

"Vera, we're here!" Tossia shouted. "She can't hear me!"

"We don't want her. Three's a crowd!" Ilya said.

Vera got on to the next brake platform. The train gathered

speed. The wheels started clicking off their road count: so many rail joints to the next turn and then start all over again. The forest on either side of the road appeared to Tossia in all its snow-clad beauty.

"Isn't it lovely!" Tossia said softly. She wondered why the part of the forest they were not working in always seemed more beautiful.

"What? Sure it's lovely, and how! Let's go to the pictures tonight."

"What's showing?"

" 'Men of Courage' ."

"All right. I've seen it four times, but it still thrills me. I like pictures about horses."

"They often show this one at the club," Ilya said.

Katya hung over the edge of the stacked logs to keep an eye on Tossia. Vera, too, kept leaning out to see what she was doing.

"Listen, I'm not going to eat her!" Ilya shouted to them angrily. Katya scrambled back to Sasha. "Good God, how many chaperones do you have?"

"Busybodies, that's all they are," Tossia said. "I'm not a child!"

"Tell them to lay off," Ilya suggested.

"I'll have to. . ."

The platform rocked and swayed under her feet.

"Frozen?" Ilya asked with awkward tenderness.

Tossia shook her head. Ilya took off his woollen muffler and wound it round her throat.

"That makes one more chaperone," Tossia said.

Ilya had a sudden impulse to tell Tossia all about the bet right there and then, so that none of the sordidness of his old life would stand between them any longer. That stupid bet dogged his every step now, it poisoned his happiness and would not let him live a day in peace.

He cleared his throat nervously and was all ready to confess his deadliest sin to her, but her eyes shone with such radiant happiness that his courage failed him. It was like stabbing her in the back. He'd do it some other time, he decided.

Tossia wanted to get her fill of the beautiful scenery before evening descended, and she had eyes for nothing else. Every now and again she turned her head on its stiff, tightly muffled neck to glance up trustingly at Ilya, and every time he responded with a proud little nod, as though it was he who had created all this incredibly beautiful woodland scenery for Tossia with his own hands.

And then he looked at her in a strange sort of way, and it seemed to Tossia that he knew something terribly interesting about them both but did not want to tell her. Tossia hated it when people put on that secretive look for no good reason that she knew.

"What is it? Tell me," she demanded.

"You know, I never even imagined there could be girls like you," he admitted in all honesty. "You're sort of so..."

He wiggled his fingers in a vague gesture, at a loss for the right word.

"Sort of what?" Tossia chuckled softly, enjoying this.

"At first I simply liked you, but now..." Ilya's voice shook. "I love you, Tossia. I didn't want to fall in love with you but I have. Only don't laugh..."

"Why should I," Tossia said and pressed her flaming cheek against the ice-cold post.

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye to see what else he would say, what other wonderful things. But he suddenly became tongue-tied.

"It's real, understand?" was all he could say.

There was something of Sasha's awkwardness in him at that moment. All fellows were awkward when it came to love, it seemed....

"Understand," Tossia mocked, feeling cheated. "You said it much better before: 'When I close my eyes I see your image before me.'"

Dammit, why did he say all those things to Tossia when he didn't mean them! His former eloquence was turning against him now.

"Forget those cheap, flowery words.... It's now that my heart keeps missing a beat! You know, I even love your faults..."

"What faults?" Tossia asked apprehensively.

Ilya realised he was treading dangerous ground and stalled.

"Go on!"

"Well, your nose is not quite . . ." Ilya mumbled. "I mean, very very slightly. . . ."

Instinctively, Tossia pressed the tip of her tilted nose down with her fist. Her silent acceptance of his criticism lent Ilya strength.

"Your height too . . . you're not exactly tall . . . but, do you know, I don't think I could ever fall in love with a tall girl now. . . . What's so damn good about a bean pole?"

Tossia inclined her head, her ideas on this score coinciding exactly with Ilya's. After his harsh criticism of her faults she naturally expected to hear a lot of nice things about her good points, for after all she had to have *some* good points, he couldn't have fallen in love with her for her faults alone. But Ilya shut up like a clam again.

He could not say to her any of those rather coarse things he usually said when making love to girls, and he just did not know any other words of love.

"Oh, I'm no good at talking," he said vexedly. "Look, would you like me to jump off the train for you?"

"You'll hurt yourself!" Tossia grabbed him by the arm.

She moved away from him at once, and looked about her, as if seeing it all for the first time: the ugly brake platform with shreds of bark on the dirty floor, the rusty brake wheel, the butt ends of the logs, marked with Vera's violet chalk, stacked on the next platform, and quite close beside her Ilya's shabby padded jacket, singed down one side. So this was how she first heard the words "I love you".

With her whole being she suddenly sensed the indomitable race of time. You could not hold it back for even a fraction of a second, you could not make it pause. . . . That great moment in her life was already in the past! She would never hear that first "I love you" again even if she stuck to a sour milk diet and lived to be two hundred! If she was lucky, she'd hear the words for the second time, for the fifth, the twentieth. . . . That would be

plenty, because she'd have to say something in reply every time, and it would be too much of a bother, hardly worth while.

Tossia used to think that the moment "he" said the magic words the whole world would become different at once. But everything remained the same: the wheels rumbled on unconcerned, the dark silhouettes of the firs and the blurred greyish shapes of the birches flashed past in the gathering twilight as quickly as before. And even her own cut and bandaged finger felt the cold as keenly as it did before Ilya told her he loved her.

She felt that Ilya had bungled the whole thing and told her of his love not quite the way he ought to have done it. Everything happened in a much too casual and unromantic way. Ilya did not know it, but his working clothes had ruined the long-awaited moment for Tossia completely. She was no prig and naturally did not expect Ilya to dress up for the occasion, but she'd rather he had not spoken of love while wearing this padded jacket with the singed side. . . .

Ilya looked hard at her, waiting for her answer. It was easy enough for him—he had rattled off his little speech and could relax in comfort now. But Tossia had to think everything over and even try to see years ahead, so there would be no mistake. To make things harder there was his singed jacket blocking her vision and taunting her. Her mind was in a whirl, and she had to play for time.

"So you say you love me?" she asked, to make everything clear. "Do you?"

Ilya was so slow to answer that Tossia doubted his intentions for a moment.

"Well yes, I do," Ilya mumbled.

"Say it without any wells!" Tossia demanded sternly and looked at his singed jacket, hoping it would help her to remain firm and to squash any stirrings of sympathy for Ilya in that woman's heart of hers which was so difficult to keep in hand. "Go on."

"But I told you. . . . Maybe you want it in writing?"

Tossia chose to ignore the sarcasm and gravely inclined her head.

"How do you love me? Just so-so or you simply can't live without me?"

She spoke with a smile, and Ilya could not be sure if she was asking him seriously or if she was just kidding him as was her wont.

"I can't," Ilya admitted sulkily. "Nothing like this has ever happened to me before. . . ."

It occurred to Ilya that he and Tossia were speaking different languages, and she'd never be able to understand how much he needed her. She did not seem to know the rules of the game at all and he could never tell what she'd do next. She asked him things that girls never asked, and he was too baffled to give a clever, dignified answer at once.

"Do you see me in your dreams?" Tossia went on interrogating him.

This was too much. He was a man and had his pride. He suddenly saw how ridiculous he must appear: a huge, hulking chap accounting for his dreams to a mere schoolgirl who didn't reach to his shoulder. Although he had dreamed of Tossia more than once, he vehemently shook his head to spite her and take her down a peg or two.

"That means you're not really in love," Tossia stated flatly. "Remember this, it might come in useful one day: you must wake up at midnight sharp and turn over your pillow, then you'll be sure to see anyone you want in your next dream."

After that, of course, Ilya could not be angry with the child any longer.

"Oh, you infant!" he sighed. Why did he have to fall in love with this girl who was still living in her child's world and did not know a damned thing about the emotions of grown-ups?

"You try it, don't just sigh! It never fails! I always do it, and dream of a certain person as sure as sure."

"Who's he? I'll break his legs for him," Ilya said jealously.

"Oh no, you won't!" Tossia glanced at the dullard coyly. "You'll have to use crutches if you do!"

There was a jubilant, caressing note in Tossia's muffled, rather

husky voice. It told him her coolness was shammed, that she did not mean everything she said.

"Tossia!" he gasped. "You too?"

"Yes, me too!" she sang out.

Ilya's arm went out for her, but his hand seemed to knock against an invisible barrier halfway and only gently touched her shoulder. The next moment he jerked it away, scorched by her look. His obedience delighted Tossia, she wanted to be nice to him, and besides it flattered her to think that she need do so little to make another person happy. And so she picked up his heavy hand with both of hers and placed it on her shoulder.

"Let it," she said softly.

From the top of the logs came Katya's belated warning cough.

Tossia Is Told

Vera put her book down and looked about the room. Nadya was busy cooking supper as usual at this hour. Xan Xanich, who was never one to let a moment go to waste, was oiling the creaky wardrobe door in the meantime. Katya and Anfissa were smartening themselves up to go to the club to see "Men of Courage". Anfissa had already tried at least five hair styles but none of them pleased her that night: they all seemed either too fast or too dowdy.

The faithful Sasha was waiting for Katya outside. He was playing his accordion, and the tune was not as gay now as when he first began: the cold was obviously getting him down.

"Are we all pretending nothing is wrong?" Vera asked angrily.

"What d'you mean?" Katya said, puzzled.

"Have you all gone blind? We've got to rescue Tossia. The silly child is rushing into trouble!"

"Ah, yes," Xan Xanich sighed noisily. "The dangerous age! The spring of life, so to say. . . ."

The girls waited to hear him say something really enlightening

after this philosophical opening, but he said no more and dived into the wardrobe.

"I hope her spring doesn't become her fall," Vera made the pun with grim humour. "Tossia may be blind, but we're not, are we? We'll wake up but it'll be too late!"

"She thinks Ilya will marry her. What a laugh!" Katya sniggered.

"All you can do is laugh," Vera looked at all of them in turn again. "Well, what are we going to do? We can't just look on any longer, and yet I've no idea how to explain things to an infant like Tossia."

"How d'you label it—tender concern for a straying lamb?" Anfissa said scornfully. "You're a real humbug, Vera!"

Vera sat up with a jolt and faced her.

"I might have expected anything of you and Ilya, but this is the limit! It's cradle snatching, that's what it is!"

"What's it got to do with me?" Anfissa sounded honestly amazed. "It's Ilya who made the bet . . ." she broke off but the words were out.

"What bet? I knew there was something fishy here. Speak up, and tell us everything!"

"I don't know exactly . . . I think it was with Fil . . ."

"Stop pretending you don't know! You're all one gang. I suppose you wanted to fix Ilya up so he wouldn't bother you while you were working on Vadim Petrovich!"

Vera's voice was loaded with hatred. Katya, who was nosy by nature, moved up closer to Vera and looked searchingly into her face. She had noticed long ago that Vera detested Anfissa, but she had never been able to find out exactly why. At times it seemed to Katya that the two must have known each other before coming to this place, and that Anfissa had done Vera some wrong in that other life to which she had no access.

"For all your reading, you're a fool, Vera," Anfissa said quietly instead of shouting Vera down as Katya had expected her to do.

She dropped the comb which seemed too heavy for her to hold. Her hand was trembling, there was something new in her whole attitude, it was as if she had opened a secret little window

into her inner world and let them look. Katya had never seen Anfissa like this before, and she felt a twinge of pity for her.

But Vera had no pity to spare Anfissa.

"The moment Tossia comes in you are to tell her everything," she said uncompromisingly.

"What a hope!" Anfissa snapped at her from force of habit, and picked up her comb.

The secret little window was slammed shut, and her hand no longer trembled. She was once again the beautiful, self-possessed Anfissa, and as such she could not be pitied.

"Then we'll tell her ourselves," Vera threatened.

"Just try! I told you in confidence because we're friends . . . Ilya will wring my neck if he finds out."

"You're so rotten you can't think of anyone but yourself," Vera said with loathing, and turned to the other girls: "We simply have to rescue Tossia now. The question is how?"

"Supposing . . ." Katya began, but rejected the idea. "No, it can't be! It was just an idea: here we are trying to rescue Tossia, and yet Ilya may be really in love with her. Maybe he means it, see?"

"Why the bet then?" Vera said.

Nadya banged down the frying pan, infuriated by Katya's suggestion.

"In love with her," she mimicked. "Everyone knows what this kind of love leads to."

"That's what I say too," Katya hastened to agree. "It was just an idea."

"All right, what are we going to do?" Vera asked again. "Let's decide what's best."

"Tossia must be told. It's always best to know, no matter how bitter the truth," Nadya said with conviction.

"Why d'you make such a fuss over her? No one bothered to rescue any of us," Anfissa said resentfully.

"And look at the result—an eyesore like you!" Nadya said.

"Well, don't look!"

Xan Xanich poked his head out of the wardrobe, a proper brownie appointed to this roomful of girls.

"One should have pity for a person," he said reasonably. "Our Tossia is such a happy child now, it's a joy to watch her, but once she finds out that Ilya is a cheat. . . . Won't it be a blow? You're all very young still, that's why you believe there's nothing more beautiful than truth in this world. Truth is a good thing, of course, but sometimes it's best not to know it, less worrying. . . ."

He stole a look at Nadya, who was making such a din with her pots and pans that he could not be sure if she had heard him or not.

"The point is not whether it's worrying or not, Xan Xanich," Vera said vexedly. "This might break her. If she finds out that Ilya's a fraud, she'll never believe anyone again. Such things have been known to happen. . . ."

"It's a funny thing, honestly!" Katya exclaimed. "We never used to bother like this about anyone before. We just roomed together, and now. . . . What's come over us?"

"Tossia is such an infant, that's why one feels one has to help," Nadya said.

Katya shook her head thoughtfully.

"No, it's not that. . . . She's made us love her, that's why. How she managed it, I don't know!"

"Well, what are we going to do?" Vera insisted. "Surely the four of us," she glanced at Anfissa and said: "rather, the three of us are strong enough to save her from one scoundrel? If we can't do that, we're not worth much."

"What d'you want us to do, stand guard over her?" Katya said doubtfully. "There's no watching her kind. I told her Ilya was a wolf, I coughed and everything. . . . Anyone else would have kept a mile away from him, but not Tossia. . . ."

The door opened with a bang and in walked a subdued Tossia. Her movements were strangely slow, as though she was afraid to splash the happiness she was brimming with. She walked round a chair that stood in her way, which ordinarily she would have kicked aside. There was a proudful dignity in her walk, even a hint of arrogance. She seemed to have grown in her own eyes with the knowledge that though undersized and plain she was loved by someone.

"Katya, why d'you make Sasha wait outside? The poor chap's frozen stiff. Hear the plaintive tune he's playing? And I've been to a meeting of cooks, it's a scream!" Tossia saw the secretive expressions on the girls' faces, and her self-importance vanished. "Have you been tearing me to pieces? Tell me, what were you saying, what? You're ashamed to tell, is that it? And you're supposed to be my friends!"

She stepped out of her felt boots and kicked them under her bed, yelling: "Goal! Goal!"

Vera spread out her hands hopelessly.

"Has anyone been asking for me?" Tossia asked, spilling the contents of her brief case on the table.

"Are you expecting anyone?" Vera asked suspiciously.

"Yes, someone."

Using her book as a screen, Vera watched Tossia, firmly resolved to save the silly child even against her will, if need be. She'd only be grateful afterwards. . . .

Nadya silently placed a pan of fried fish on the corner of the table. Xan Xanich stopped oiling the wardrobe door, washed his hands and slowly wiped them on Nadya's towel with the obvious pleasure of a soon-to-be-married man. He then draped the towel on the headboard of Nadya's bed, gave the washed-out embroidered cock a fillip on the comb, and sat down. "They've started on the rafters, Nadya dear," he told her his greatest news. "At this rate, we'll be able to marry before May Day."

"The sooner the better," Nadya said quietly.

There were three loud knocks on the door, with long solemn pauses between them. Nadya opened the door. It was Ilya, dressed in his best clothes, smart leather coat, necktie and everything.

"Peace to the household," he proclaimed, striking a pose in the middle of the room, with his back to Anfissa.

Tossia sat quiet as a mouse at the table, peeping from behind her pile of books with wonder and admiration at Ilya, who appeared as splendid as a prince out of a fairy-tale. With a leisurely gesture he got out a new pack of cigarettes, broke the paper, got one out and asked the ladies' permission to smoke, as befitting a man wearing a necktie.

From the breast pocket of his jacket he produced two blue tickets, put one of them back and handed the other to Tossia with a ceremonious bow.

"'Men of Courage' with dancing before the show."

"You're making a date with me, yes?" Tossia cried, delighted.

"I am," Ilya said rather less firmly. It occurred to him that the child was perhaps putting some queer meaning of her own into the words, but he had no idea what it was.

"She's not going anywhere," Vera stated flatly, getting to her feet. "She's seen that picture already."

"Of course I'm going!" Tossia cried. "I love pictures about horses. I've seen it four times and I'll go and see it again, you can't stop me!"

"That's the spirit!" Ilya said. "Don't you mind these blue stockings, they'd lock you up in a nunnery if they had their way."

"Keep quiet, you smart Alec. We know all about you. You're not welcome here, so go while the going's good."

"Tossia, I'll be waiting outside," he said, starting for the door.

"I won't be a sec," Tossia promised.

Ilya blew a smoke ring into the room and walked out. Tossia stood on tiptoe, thrust her head into the widening ring and laughed happily. Vera and Nadya exchanged looks of alarm. Tossia was flying about the room as though she had grown wings. She pushed her books into the brief case, pulled out her dusty suitcase from under the bed, dived into it and got out her brooch, her only piece of jewelry, and hastily pinned it on her breast.

"May I?" she asked Anfissa, and without waiting for permission dabbed some of her strongest scent on her face and hands. In her haste she grabbed her fur cap with the ear-flaps which she wore to work, but discarded it at once and put on a head kerchief, which made her feel more of a woman.

Her excitement seemed to be relayed to Sasha waiting outside, for he suddenly changed his tune to a boisterous march. Katya started, and rushed out of the room.

Tossia reached for her overcoat.

"I told you, you're not going!" Vera said, pushing her away.

"What do you mean?" Tossia cried, aghast.

"You're not going, that's all."

Vera blocked the way to the door. Tossia looked about her like a trapped little beast, seeking support in someone. Xan Xanich looked away; he had already finished his supper and was fiddling with the wardrobe door again. Anfissa's vacant stare was fixed on the clock, and Nadya had come over to Vera's side to stand beside her.

"You've got no right!" Tossia shouted. "I'm grown-up! I've a passport and everything!"

"You're a young fool, passport or no passport!" Nadya said. "So you want to go on a date, do you? What you want is a good spanking, that's all the date you'll get."

"We mean well, Tossia," Vera tried reasoning with her. "Ilya will play about with you and drop you. We know!"

"I'd like to see him try!" Tossia muttered, and then cried defiantly: "What business is it of yours anyway? Why d'you meddle in my private life? You're always pushing me about: you mustn't do this and mustn't do that, all I may do is sums. I never want to see another sum again!"

Tossia sent her brief case flying under her bed.

"Huh, private life indeed!" Nadya said. "You'll learn what private life means with a vengeance when you're left with a baby!"

"He hasn't even kissed me yet, and you're saying such awful things!" Tossia was really hurt. "Leave me alone, all of you! Why should you care?"

"We're fond of you, damn you," Vera said.

"If that's your brand of fondness, I'd rather you hated me. . . . Even Anfissa never hurt me like this, and you two are supposed to be my friends! What's eating you two? Are you jealous, or what? Maybe you're afraid I'll get married before you do? I don't want to just yet, don't judge others by yourself, Nadya. Not much fun in that!"

"Stop running after Ilya, and no one will bother you any more," Vera said.

"Who's running after whom?" Tossia cried indignantly. "You must all be blind! Didn't you see him bring me the ticket?" She did not mean to sound smug, but a note of triumph crept into her voice just the same.

"Now listen," she said angrily. "Don't act the healthy collective, or whatever you call it. I can do very well without your touching concern for me. Healthy collective, my eye, fighting like cats and dogs most of the time!"

Tossia made a lunge for her overcoat.

Xan Xanich shook his head, disapproving of the whole scene. He was through with the wardrobe door and was now making the rounds of the bedside tables, oiler at the ready. None of them creaked, but Xan Xanich believed that prevention was better than cure and so he decided to oil every single hinge there was.

"Listen to me, Tossia dear," Vera said in the ingratiating tone sick nurses use when talking to hopeless cases. "Look at yourself; you're only a child, and he's. . . ."

"You're biting off more than you can chew," Nadya said in so fierce a manner as if Tossia, in fighting for her right to love, was dealing her a cruel blow, all but threatening her very life.

"And you've nothing to bite!" Tossia hit back. "I like the way you and Vera talk: if it was some poor fish it would be all right, but Ilya's too good for plain little me! Everyone should know his place, is that it?"

"Maybe so. You're just scared to face the truth," Nadya said spitefully.

"It's a lie, it's not the truth at all! I can see right through you now. I pity you, you're always telling yourself you're plain and you can't see straight because of that. Aren't you ashamed of yourself? You and I are no worse than anyone else, we're not second-rate or anything. Why, I'd jump in the lake if I thought I really was! Chin up, understand?"

Nadya dismissed her suggestion with a scornful gesture.

"It sounds all right, but actually. . . . You think you're the cleverest of all, that life only began with you, but it's been going on for ages and you can't change it. . . . Don't wreck your life, I tell you, or you'll weep tears of blood. . . ."

Tossia was getting fed up.

"Listen, my dearest friends, let's call it a day. There's no sense in, what d'you call it, holding a dispute. I'll go out with anyone I like. It's my life and I can do whatever I like with it. And if you're going to interfere, I'll move into another room, or maybe I'll write to the newspaper about it, I'll say you're molesting a young worker. They won't pat you on the head for it."

"For shame, Tossia, you know we mean well," Nadya said.

"Honestly, can't you understand that he's no good?" said Vera. "He's a rotter, and you know it."

"He only looks it, he's good inside!" Tossia said in Ilya's defence, stamped her foot and sang with a challenge:

*She loved him rotter that he was,
And not quite good enough for her. . . .*

"Don't waste your breath on her," Nadya exploded, snatched the ticket out of Tossia's hand and tore it across again and again.

"Oh, you!" Tossia said with fine contempt. "Why don't you pull my boots off then? Go on, pull, why don't you?" She thrust a foot out towards Nadya. "You're so big and tough, but you don't understand a thing. I'll go out barefooted into the snow, you can't stop me. Slave-driver!"

Tossia kicked the door open.

"Wait," Vera said imperiously. "Ilya isn't serious, he's doing it on a bet. . . ."

"On a bet?" Tossia repeated, too stunned to make a move.

Xan Xanich shook his head sorrowfully, it was too bad of the girls to insist on the truth against his sound advice.

"He bet Fil that you'll fall in love with him," Vera said with reluctance and disgust. "Ask Anfissa, she'll tell you."

"He did? But how could he, Mummy Vera? Betting on a human being?" Tossia asked in a small, plaintive voice, pressing her clenched hands to her breast. "Anfissa, is it true?"

Anfissa turned away with a shrug. Tossia came away from the door, a defeated, pathetic little thing, with all the fight gone out of her. She unbuttoned her coat but didn't have the

strength to take it off. She collapsed on her bed—a young birch tree cut at the root.

“Cry a bit, you’ll feel better for it,” Xan Xanich said kindly.

Vera sat on the edge of Tossia’s bed and hugged her.

“We won’t let anyone hurt you,” she said.

Tossia raised her head with a jerk. Her face had grown haggard in those few minutes, and her eyes were very, very dry.

“What did he bet?”

Vera looked at Anfissa.

“His cap, I think,” Anfissa said with her habitual shrug.

“Isn’t his good enough for him?” Tossia said very softly.

Anfissa shrugged again, but a look at Tossia frightened her.

“Goodness, Tossia, don’t take it so hard! Of all the men in the world Xan Xanich is the only one you can trust!”

Xan Xanich acknowledged the compliment with a grave bow and proceeded to pack his oiler away in a special little leather bag he had for it.

Ilya started rattling the window to make Tossia hurry up.

Slowly, she got to her feet. As she buttoned up her coat, her fingers brushed against the brooch on her dress. She stood there with her hand poised in mid-air, striving to remember why she had put on her only ornament. And then, parting forever with her undiscerning happiness of only a few minutes before, she unpinned the now unwanted brooch, threw it under her bed, and stepped to the door.

“I say, Tossia,” Vera called to her with distress in her voice.

Tossia looked at her with unseeing eyes and walked out of the room.

“There’s your truth for you,” Xan Xanich said, wiping his hands on a piece of cloth.

The Bet Is Lost

Stern and silent, Tossia walked down the street beside Ilya. The change in her puzzled him: what could have happened to her in those few minutes while he was outside, waiting for her on the porch?

"Tossia, what's wrong?" he asked warily, wondering what new trouble was in store for him.

Tossia said nothing for about ten steps.

"Nothing. . . Sick of everything, that's all."

"You do look out of sorts," Ilya said gently. "I was thinking of you all the time I was waiting. I felt you were there with me. And here too. . . ." He hit the left side of his chest with a fist.

"That's how it's supposed to be," Tossia said with withering scorn.

"Those nuns have been working on you, I see," Ilya said with a penitent sigh. "It's no secret, I did go round with other girls here before you came. But I didn't know what real love was then, I was as dumb as they come. It's you who changed all my ideas for me, Tossia, and put me wise. . . . How I ever lived without you, I don't know! I can't believe it now."

"You're making pretty speeches again," Tossia said resentfully.

"I'm not. I'd like to use really beautiful words when I speak of you, only I don't know any. . . ." He fell silent for a minute or two. "I'm scared, Tossia, I don't know why. It's as if there's a wall between us that stops you from coming to me. Tell me what it is, I'll smash it to bits!"

It surprised Tossia that Ilya understood her so well. It would have delighted her before that they were such twin souls, but now she only thought spitefully: "Just trying hard to get himself an extra bit of headgear."

The hurt rankled more and more, and at last she knew what she must do. She'd pretend she knew nothing about the bet, she'd bide her time. But when they reached the club, she'd lead Ilya out into the middle of the floor and slap his face in front of everyone for trifling with people's feelings. Her hands itched to slap the traitor's face, and she walked faster to bring that beautiful moment nearer.

"Would you like me to tell you what sort of girl you are?" Ilya said. "Would you?"

Her curiosity was stronger than her vindictiveness.

"All right, tell me," she said in a kinder tone than she meant. "If you must talk."

"You know, you're not like other girls at all," Ilya said with fervour. "Others are merely girls, but you're a person, Tossia. A *person*, understand?"

"Go on," Tossia said glumly, trying her hardest not to believe what that cheapskate, who had swapped her love for Fil's cap, was saying to her.

"Maybe you're not too beautiful. . . ."

"Thanks a lot!"

"Wait a moment. . . . You don't need beauty. Other girls need it to bamboozle people, but you're beautiful without being pretty. Only don't laugh, Tossia. . . . Beauty is like a dress. A girl may put on a pretty dress but remain ugly inside. But you, you're beautiful inside and out, it's a wonder others don't see it," Ilya said, feeling sorry for those of his countrymen and contemporaries generally who could not see Tossia's hidden beauty.

She listened to him, half believing him and thinking all the time how wonderful all those things would have sounded to her if there had been no bet and no Fil with his wretched cap, messing everything up. She felt terribly sorry for herself, lost on a bet, and for poor Ilya who sounded so sincere and did not seem to be play-acting at all. Her mood more benevolent now, she began to think that all Ilya was guilty of was coming out so late with his pretty speech which she had long been yearning to hear to make her happiness complete.

Honestly, what a man, couldn't he have said it all sooner? What had been stopping him? Why couldn't he have said it that time they were riding on the brake platform, for instance, and wasting their time talking about dreams and other such rot?

Ilya talked on and on, putting more and more feeling into his words to prove to Tossia how badly he needed her. The thought of losing her terrified him, he had to try and sweep away all those towering barricades that Tossia's room-mates had erected to keep her safe from him.

And suddenly something quivered and broke in Tossia. The steel screws she had tightened on her heart became loose, and the biggest and angriest screw of them all suddenly went on strike and refused to act against Ilya. Something was badly wrong

with the heart itself, too. Before she knew it, her uncompromising youngster's heart swelled with tears and became so soft and womanish, mushy even, that it could be wrung out and hung in the sun to dry.

To her surprise, Tossia realised she was crying. She did not wipe her tears, anxious not to betray her emotion to him, but merely licked them away with the tip of her tongue and threw her poor, happy head further and further back.

For a moment she pictured how happy she would have been riding on that rickety platform with Ilya and listening to all the things he was saying to her now. Oh, Ilya, you silly fool, why did you have to rob our love and kill my happiness before it really came with your shameless and stupid bet?

Forgetting caution she turned to look at him, and he saw the tears streaming down her face.

"Why, Tossia, what's the matter?" Ilya cried, appalled. "Has anyone hurt you? Tell me who and I'll knock his block off!"

Tossia smiled crookedly.

"I don't want to, but I do believe you ..." she said, hating herself for being so weak.

"You've got to believe me!" Ilya said hotly. "Believe me, Tossia, I'll never fail you. Believe me with all your heart, and everything will be all right."

He sounded so sincere and loving, the bet may never have been.

"Do shut up," Tossia begged wearily, and moved away from him as of old. "What have I done to deserve this!"

They passed the unfinished house where Xan Xanich and Nadya had been promised a room. In the past week it had grown noticeably thanks to Dementiev's efforts. The newly added logs gleamed white against the already weathered old ones.

The girl with the ear-rings came running out of the club, pursued by Fil and Freezer, both the worse for drink. She dashed down the porch steps and there they caught her. Freezer held their victim's arms while Fil stuffed handfuls of snow down her neck.

"Will you turn me down again when I ask you for a dance?"

"I won't, I won't I won't!" she screamed at the top of her voice.

Tossia looked at Fil's cap. So that's what her love was worth. It was just an ordinary cap, badly worn too. Why did Ilya want it so badly? Couldn't he have found a better one in the whole town, if bet he had to? They had priced her love pretty low, hadn't they.

She looked at Ilya out of the corner of her eye, and her anger, temporarily mollified, began to seethe in her again.

"What d'you think you're doing?" Ilya said in annoyance, sensing that Tossia was again slipping away from him behind some newly erected barricades. "Drop it, I tell you!"

Fil winked at Ilya, certain that he was only playing up to Tossia. But Ilya was in no mood for joking with his bosom pals.

"Didn't you hear me?" he roared.

"Oh, cut out the intellectual stuff," Freezer said.

Ilya easily disengaged him from the squealing girl, and threw him towards the nearest telegraph pole. The seedy chap flew over a snowdrift like a bat, hugged the pole and banged his chin against it. It looked as if he was kissing it.

At any other time Tossia, who loved a joke, would have had a good laugh at the sight. But now she merely frowned, wondering what to make of Ilya. When was he the real person, when he made that bet with Fil or when he came to the rescue of the girl with the ear-rings? What a mix-up!

"Thanks, Ilya," the girl mumbled gratefully, felt to see if her ear-rings were safe and sound, and slipped back into the club.

"You shouldn't have done it, you know," Fil said gruffly to Ilya, helping Freezer out of the snowdrift. "Hitting a pal. . ."

Tossia and Ilya mounted the porch steps. Just then the engine of the "cuckoo" train gave a shrill whistle as if it wanted to warn her. She sighed, hating Ilya for betting, herself for being such a born fool that she could not make him out, the girl with the ear-rings for getting into trouble at that very wrong moment and thus giving Ilya a chance to display his doubtful chivalry, and mankind in general for taking such ages

after climbing down from the trees to put things right in the world of grownups and dumping all the mess, piled up since the beginning of time, into her lap. . . .

She bought herself a ticket.

"But I gave you a ticket," Ilya said in surprise.

"I've lost it. . . ."

They walked into the hall. Dancing was still in full swing, and they were only just beginning to put the benches in rows. Ilya quickly slipped out of his leather coat and helped Tossia off with her coat. That had never happened in the lumber town before, and the girls, ranged against "their" wall, buzzed in a disapproving chorus. Tossia saw their curious and envious glances, and felt reluctant to lead Ilya out into the middle of the room and beat him up in front of everyone. It would have been another matter if only people she respected were present. But if that crowd thought she was going to put on a show for them, they could think again!

Playing for time, Tossia took her coat from Ilya, brushed off a speck of dust that wasn't there, and folding it very carefully, placed it on top of the pile of coats in the corner. Next she took off her head scarf and very slowly began to fold it, taking care that the edges should correspond exactly. Ilya stood beside her in an amazingly humble and patient attitude. He actually seemed to forget why they were there. All he wanted was to stand beside Tossia and watch her fussing with her things.

"Tossia, your ribbon's got undone," he whispered, glad to do her this trifling service.

All her grown-up cares and worries slipped into the background at once, and with a little girl's pride in her ribbons she clutched at her bows before the girls, staring at her enviously, could notice anything wrong. In spite of herself she thanked Ilya with a look. It pleased her that he was not like his usual self: he looked so amazingly humble, not to say tame. And Tossia knew who had tamed him.

Was it really true what her room-mates had told her? Tossia was in more doubt than ever now. Maybe Ilya and Fil did say something of the sort in fun, and Anfissa had missed the joke

and carried the tale round the town. Honestly, weren't some people the limit!

She couldn't be sure about the bet yet. But one thing she did know: Vera and Nadya were warning her against the old Ilya, they were too prejudiced to see that he was becoming a different person.

Fil was watching the two of them like a hawk. He could not understand Ilya at all, and Tossia's pensive expression was no less baffling. How near was Ilya to victory? To annoy his straying pal, Fil waved his hand, with two fingers sticking up, high above his head to remind Ilya that he only had two days to go before he won or lost his bet.

Ilya read Fil's eloquent signal and stole a guilty look at Tossia who was still struggling with her hair ribbons. He swore he'd tell her everything that very night. They'd dance first, see "Men of Courage", and then he'd take her home and make a clean breast of it. He'd better tell her himself before someone else did.

"What would you like, a waltz or a foxtrot?" he asked her, ready to oblige.

Tossia gazed at him with a far-away look, and his question did not seem to penetrate.

"I don't care. . . ."

"A waltz then," Ilya decided for both of them and rushed towards the record-player.

He had to do something for her, right now, this very minute to atone even if only in part for his crime. Ignoring protests, he took off the record that was playing, searched through the box, and put on another one, a waltz. He dashed back to Tossia, rudely elbowing his way through the dancing crowd.

Tossia was in a panic when he left her side. What if he never found her again, what if he never got to her through that crowd? What if some awful accident happened: the record-player broke down, or the ceiling caved in, anything might happen, and they'd never have their dance! Her plan of slapping Ilya's face in front of everyone seemed ridiculous and fantastic to her now. What an idea!

Ilya dived out of the crowd. Tossia stepped towards him, their hands met. They fell into step at once, and both felt it only natural. It was not they who were following the music, it was the waltz that seemed to obey them and their movements. Tossia's hopes that she'd make Ilya as good a partner as the glamorous Anfissa were quite justified.

The thought of whether Ilya was guilty or not was farthest from her mind. That short moment of happiness that she had wrenched from life was all she was alive to. It was as if Fate, tired of harassing her, was showing them how wonderful everything could be if they were worthy of their love. Tossia refused to worry about the future when the truth about the bet would finally have to be faced. Let that obscure future take care of itself. It always does anyway, either for the best or for the worst, so let it. . . .

To enjoy the moment completely, Tossia closed her eyes, and surrendered to the enchantment of the waltz. She did not want to see the smirk on Fil's face or any of his leering gang, she did not want to see Anfissa watching for someone at the door, or Katya gossiping with the mechanic's wife, or those unsmiling girls ranged along "their" wall, jealously watching Tossia's every step in the hope that she'd get flustered and trip over Ilya's feet. She did not even want to see Ilya very much just then. With her eyes closed he appeared better than he was, and it was easier to believe that he had never made that bet with Fil.

"You're a jolly good dancer, you know," Ilya said.

Tossia hushed him with a look, and, responding to her mood, he fell silent and held her more tenderly than before, as if she were a fragile precious thing.

They danced oblivious to their surroundings. There were just the two of them in the club, in the town, in the world. . . . When the music stopped, they did not come down to earth at once, and only the quickly emptying floor told that their waltz was over.

Ilya took Tossia to the girls' wall, and stood under his icon-like portrait. The portrait gallery of the lumber camp was now the richer for two pictures: Nadya's and Semechkin's,

the tractor driver. The artist had wanted to flatter Nadya and make her prettier than she was, but his talent had run out when he started on the second half of her face, and the result was rather grim. The bright red bunting with the words "Front-rankers of Our Lumber Camp" nailed above the portraits, seemed to suggest that there was room for at least five more worthy lumbermen under its hospitable wing.

Ilya inclined his head, thanking Tossia for the dance. Fil and his gang roared with laughter at the sight of Ilya acting the polished gentleman. Ilya scowled at them, but did not make a move, reluctant to part with Tossia if even for a moment.

True to custom, all the men walked back to "their" wall, Ilya alone remaining beside Tossia. The girls all began to whisper together with quick, condemning looks at Ilya who had dared break the unwritten law obeyed by everyone there since times immemorial.

Tossia suddenly remembered Katya telling her that Ilya had had lots of affairs before she came, and decided reasonably enough that if his affairs had really been so many, at least one of the girls involved was bound to be there now. Tossia moved aside a little so the stove should not hide her from view. Ilya followed her obediently. "Like a thread and needle," Tossia thought and straightened up proudly. Let all his old flames watch and burst with envy!

She felt no malice towards those deserted flames of his, nor was she afraid of them. She was so kind-hearted that she even felt a bit sorry for all those girls who had the tough luck of imagining that Ilya could have once been in love with any of them. Neither did she feel so much as a twinge of jealousy. Firstly, because all that had been ages ago, long before she came. And secondly . . . the first was reason enough.

Fil's gang called out things and roared louder than ever. Tossia looked at them and frowned. Ilya would not have minded if he alone were the butt of their jokes, but he could not let them laugh at Tossia.

"I'll be back in a moment," he told Tossia and strode across the floor towards them.

Tossia wanted to hold him back, afraid that his silly pride would land him in a fight with the drunks, but she was not quick enough.

Ilya bore down on his old pals.

"If any of you laugh at Tossia again I'll do to you what God did to the turtle! That clear?"

The bluster went out of them at once. The whole gang looked as dejected as if they were there to attend a lecture on morality rather than see an exciting movie. Freezer looked the saddest of the lot: he rubbed his chin which was still sore from contact with the telegraph pole, and slunk away to the exit to keep out of harm's way.

Tossia could not hear what Ilya was saying, but she guessed that he was telling his old pals off. It was really amazing how quickly he was changing his ways! She was quite sure now that there had never been any bet. How could a decent person like Ilya do it, I ask you! He simply couldn't, and that was that. She was a fine one too, so ready to believe all those lies about him. It was she who was betraying Ilya and not the other way round.

She was so ashamed of herself for all her horrid suspicions that she could not wait to do something particularly nice for him. But Ilya was still talking to the gang, worse luck, and there was Katya hurrying towards her with a worried look.

"I say, Tossia, have you any money with you? The mechanic's wife is letting me have her yarn. . . . At almost cost price too!"

"What yarn?" Tossia was quite bewildered. How could anyone talk of yarn and money at a moment like this!

"Leningrad yarn, the best there is. . . . The entire colour range, can you imagine it? I've squeezed Sasha dry and I'm still short ten rubles. I wanted to borrow it from the lottery money, I won't have to hand it in too soon, but Sasha won't hear of it! You know what he's like," Katya said in a whisper of sheer joy, for that's how straight *her* Sasha was! "Something tells me I'm going to have plenty of trouble with that man!"

"Let's go and look," Tossia said, going with Katya towards the mountain of overcoats piled on the bench in the corner.

While Tossia dug in the pile for her coat, Katya exchanged a

few words with Anfissa, who was still waiting for someone at the door.

"Why aren't you dancing? Are you waiting for someone?" Katya asked.

"Vadim Petrovich and I were going to see the show together, it's almost time and he hasn't come yet," Anfissa explained with readiness. "I've never waited for anyone in my life, and here I am waiting for *him*! How d'you like that?"

"You should know best," Katya said, evading the issue, and then added boastfully: "My Sasha never makes me wait, he always comes early!"

Anfissa smiled at her own secret thoughts.

"You know, Vadim Petrovich treats me like a lady, he's always so terribly polite," she said confidently. "But he's a funny bloke. He's an engineer and everything, he graduated with honours, but he's just a boy. It certainly takes all kinds!"

Katya stifled a yawn and looked round to see how much longer Tossia was going to take.

"Tossia's having the time of her life! She's got pluck, that kid," Anfissa said her first nice thing about Tossia. "Not giving a damn for the bet or Vera's warning! I never thought she had it in her. . . . She's right too, people should be above gossip!"

Anfissa put so much feeling into this last sentence, that Katya suspected she had not only Tossia and Ilya in mind, but also herself and the new engineer.

"So Tossia knows all about that bet already," Katya's voice was flat with disappointment.

She was more sorry for herself than Tossia. The girls had managed to open Tossia's eyes without her assistance, and she had missed the whole show.

In the meantime, Tossia had found her coat and handed Katya all the money she had in her pockets, a few crumpled ruble notes, some silver and coppers.

"Thank you, dear, thanks a lot," Katya said with genuine emotion, and in that same breath scolded her for her flightiness: "What d'you think you're doing, eh? It's disgusting to watch!"

He made a bet that you'd fall for him, and you're dancing with him as if nothing happened! Isn't there a grain of pride in you?"

"What's in a grain!" Tossia said defiantly.

"Don't be too clever, my girl," Katya said vexedly, feeling really cheated. "You promised to show him, so why don't you do it. For the whole of womankind," she added sarcastically.

"Shut up!" Tossia snapped at her. "You don't know what you're talking about! What bet? I'll tell Sasha if you don't stop flinging mud at honest people! Sasha won't like your gossiping, you know."

Katya was too stunned to speak, the way Tossia had turned the tables on her! And Tossia marched over to Ilya, waiting for her under his portrait on the wall. He came hurrying forward, they met half-way, he took her in his arms and they surrendered to the tune and the rhythm in perfect harmony again.

Fil came meandering through the crowd of dancers towards them. He kept straightening the cap clinging to the back of his head. Ilya quickly danced Tossia away to the other end of the room, but Fil was not so easy to shake off.

With the fiendish expression of a Mephistopheles out of an amateur show, he leered at them from behind the stove, fanning his face with two fingers. Catching Tossia's eye, he quickly pulled off his cap and waved it as if inviting Ilya to swop Tossia for it.

Ilya snarled at him and Fil hurriedly slipped behind the stove. But the damage was done: Tossia had understood the pantomime perfectly. All her doubts vanished. She stopped as abruptly as if she had run into a blank wall, and shook off Ilya's hand with loathing. It made her sick to touch him now.

"Listen, Tossia," Ilya began, but at the look she gave him all the words he was going to use in self-defence stuck in his throat.

He realised in a flash that Tossia knew all about the bet. Her angry and frankly contemptuous look made him avert his eyes guiltily, and he just stood there beside her with a hangdog air.

Stuck in the middle of the room they got in the dancers' way. Couples bumped into them, exchanged puzzled glances, and gave

them a wide berth on the next round. The wall-flowers were whispering excitedly. Fil's gang watched Ilya and Tossia closely, hoping there'd be a beautiful row.

The ache in Tossia was not so much for herself, not even for her defiled first love, but for the Ilya she had imagined, the Ilya who had been as proud as an eagle, a man with a big heart, and who had turned out to be just a poor fish, a coward and a sap. He was even worse than Fil, if it came to that. Fil at least made no pretence at anything, he was a bully and a rowdy and that's what everyone knew him to be.

And it did not all begin and end with Ilya either. Tossia, who liked to make sweeping generalisations, suddenly saw with bitter regret how imperfect the human race as a whole still appeared to be. People just couldn't seem to part with their disgraceful survivals, dragging them into communism with them. And the fine talk!

All the people who shared the world with her, the whole human race to a man, suddenly wilted and shrank in Tossia's eyes, for all their beautiful sputniks and wonderful spaceships. All mankind suddenly became a head shorter. Oh, people, aren't you ever going to improve!

Fil ventured to poke his head out now.

"Fil, give him your cap," Tossia called out in a voice quivering with pain and anger. With a gesture of extreme aversion she pointed at Ilya, without looking at him. "He won... Give it to him, go on!"

Her order was so peremptory, there was such a world of contempt for both of them in her voice, that Fil obeyed it unprotestingly and held out the cap to Ilya, who took it just as meekly.

The record came to an end, but all the dancing couples remained where they were.

"Oh, you," Tossia said quietly, staring at Ilya's shoulder.

She did not say more. She made a hopeless gesture and walked towards the exit—a small, erect figure, her face a mask of grief. People made way for her. Ilya seemed riveted to the floor, he could only follow Tossia with his eyes. The girl with the ear-rings put on a record, but all eyes turned on her accusing-

ly, and she quickly stopped the music. Tossia covered her face with her upraised arm, and ran out of the front door.

The door slammed. Ilya threw the cap he was holding to Fil. In two strides he reached the mountain of coats in the corner, found his own cap and flung it at Fil too.

Nimble as a monkey, Fil ducked and caught the famous deerskin cap immortalised for posterity on Ilya's portrait.

"What d'you mean by that?" he asked, afraid to believe his good luck.

"Just this," Ilya said, and striding over, knocked Fil down. "It's all your doing!"

Elbowing his way through the crowd, he rushed outside to find Tossia.

Fil got to his feet slowly, holding a cap in each hand. He blinked vacantly, staring first at one and then at the other, wondering who won the bet, he or Ilya?

In the distance Ilya could see Tossia running down the deserted street, now appearing in the light of the street lamp, now swallowed up by the gloom. He leapt down the porch steps and raced after her. Suddenly his way was barred by three friends of Fil's. They were on their way to the club and knew nothing about what had just happened.

"When are you going to bring her to Kamchatka, Ilya? We're sick of waiting," Longlegs asked and grinned.

Ilya saw red. He picked Longlegs up, swung him and pushed him head first into the snow. The other two chaps backed away in fear. Ilya started forward, but Tossia was no longer in sight. Longlegs sank deeper and deeper in the snowdrift as he struggled to get out. A pair of kicking legs was all that could be seen of the man.

Ilya dashed into the girls' hostel, and finding no Tossia, dashed out again.

"Tossia, where are you?" he called. "I can explain everything. . . . It was so long ago. . . . Tossia, where are you, Tossia!"

There was a full moon. Most of the windows were already dark. Suddenly all the lights were switched off in the club—the movie was on. The streets were deserted, silent and lifeless, flood-

ed with the cold light of the moon. For a moment Ilya had a strange sensation that he was the only person left in the world.

Tossia was hiding under the thick branches of the old fir tree outside the office. Ilya ran past without seeing her. He stood for a moment on the corner, called out her name, and ran back past the tree.

Afraid of succumbing to the plea in his voice, so eloquent with remorse that it wrung her heart, Tossia stopped her ears with both hands so as not to hear it.

His desperate cry rang out over the hushed town.

"Tossia, where are you? Tossia!"

And only the distant forest echo responded.

Paper Doilies

Dementiev was sitting in front of his table, piled high with blueprints and open reference-books, working something out with the aid of a slide-rule and humming off key.

Young Petya Churkin was squatting on the bed. He had already made friends with the new engineer and felt quite at home in his room. Petya was busy leafing through a picture book and eating gingerbread. The paper bag with the gingerbread stood on the table half-way between Petya and Dementiev. They both reached out for it at the same time, and their hands touched.

"Why do Indians live in America, when they should live in India?" Petya asked.

"Ask Columbus that," Dementiev answered.

There was a soft knock on the door, followed by fierce and loud banging.

"Come in, the door's open," Dementiev called out, his mouth full of gingerbread.

The door was kicked open and Anfissa came in, worked up to boiling point and all set for a row.

"Didn't you know that we were going to the club to see the show? I waited and waited, I got the tickets, and you..."

She flung the crumpled tickets on the table.

"So you didn't get my message?" Dementiev said, really put out. "I tried to find you but you weren't in the telephone room. . . . I simply could not go to the show tonight, Anfissa, please believe me. I've got urgent work to do, there's an important conference tomorrow, I'm getting ready for battle, you see. . . ."

He indicated the heaped table, and flourished the slide-rule, anxious to prove to Anfissa that he really could not have gone to the show and therefore had to be forgiven.

"You should have let me know," Anfissa said with a frown still on her face but already relenting. "So this is where you live!"

She looked about her at the comfortless, uncared-for bachelor's room. Dementiev dashed about in an effort to give it some semblance of order: he kicked his felt boots under the bed, grabbed the socks he had hung up to dry in front of the stove and shoved them into his pocket, pushed the firewood scattered all over the floor into a pile, and turned the pillow on his bed clean side up.

"It's too late, I've seen it all," Anfissa said smiling.

"Petya, isn't it time for you to go home?" Dementiev asked the boy ingratiatingly. "It's dark, your mother is worrying, I know."

"You haven't told me about the Indians yet."

"We'll have to postpone the Indians till tomorrow, old chap. Come early, and I'll tell you how they hunt buffalo."

"You swear?"

"Why, Petya, I never go back on my promises."

Dementiev placed his hand against his heart with great solemnity. Reassured, Petya climbed down to the floor, put on his coat and took a gingerbread for the road.

"Bye-bye, Uncle Vadim," he said, ostentatiously ignoring Anfissa.

"Good luck, Petya." Dementiev shook the boy's hand.

Petya went away.

"Why d'you want to bother with him?" Anfissa said resentfully. "Couldn't you find a better friend?"

"You see, I'm particularly interested in children Petya's age,"

Dementiev said apologetically, helping Anfissa off with her coat. "They're a curious lot, you know. They're a different generation from us although we're living at the same time. Their life will be wiser and cleaner, and they'll live to see things we won't see. . . . However, we'll talk about that some other time. Would you mind sitting over there for about ten minutes while I finish this calculation, and then we'll have tea. All right?"

Dementiev put the kettle on the hot plate and took up his slide-rule again.

Anfissa examined the room, and finding the dust quite furry in places, just as she had supposed, rolled up the sleeves of her smart sweater and got down to cleaning.

"Oh no, I can't let you do it," Dementiev protested. "Why should you, really?"

"Do your calculations and keep quiet," Anfissa said, convinced that it was her right to tidy up his room. "And remember that I haven't quite forgiven you for missing the show."

She lit the stove, arranged all his things on the shelves the way she thought best, swept the floor with a broom of fir branches, and dusted everything thoroughly.

Dementiev, absorbed in his work, began to hum again.

"What's that song you're humming?" Anfissa asked.

"The tune's been haunting me all day. . . . Does it ever happen to you?"

"Sure."

"And . . . d'you like gingerbread too?" Dementiev grabbed the bag and held it out to Anfissa. "When I was a first-year student I used to spend half my grant on gingerbread."

"I love gingerbread," Anfissa said.

It gave them both a little thrill to discover they liked the same thing.

Anfissa found a roll of blue paper in a corner, measured a piece off for the bedside table and another for the shelf above the wash-stand, and cut out a lacy border on both. She also camouflaged the rather ugly wash-stand very cleverly, using clips to fasten the paper.

No one watching Anfissa now would have believed what a

shirker she was when her turn came to clean the room at the hostel. Wouldn't Tossia have been amazed to see her lazy roommate scrubbing away! Anfissa did it with such zeal, as if it had been the dream of all her not very virtuous life to tidy Dementiev's room for him.

"Put your books away now," she said when the kettle came to a boil.

Dementiev was delighted with what she had done to his room.

"You're a wizard! I feel as though I've moved into a new room." Quite overwhelmed, he ran his finger along the lacy edge of the paper doily. "And what's this for?"

"To make it prettier," Anfissa said in some confusion.

She wanted to wash her hands, but there was no water.

"It won't take me a minute." Dementiev snatched the water can off its nail and dashed out of the room. He brought it back filled with snow. "There you are," he sounded victorious. "There is a way out of everything!"

He held the can over the fire to melt the snow, Anfissa poured some boiling water over it to help, but the snow was taking its time.

Dementiev hung up the can on its nail, and they both washed their hands by spooning up the half-melted snow for one another. They dried their hands on the same towel. Dementiev dried each finger thoroughly, gratefully handling the towel that made a sort of bridge between him and Anfissa, bringing them closer together.

"How d'you like your tea?" Anfissa asked, pouring out.

"Make mine the same as yours," he said eagerly.

"It'll be strong then."

"Where did you find these sweets? I've been looking for them everywhere."

"Well, your room, you know. . . ."

"Is a bloody mess!" Dementiev finished for her, and both burst out laughing.

As Dementiev sipped his strong hot tea, he watched Anfissa with frank admiration. This newly discovered side to her character made her even more precious and dear.

"We'll keep these for Petya, if you don't mind," he said, putting aside some sweets.

A shadow of annoyance darkened Anfissa's face. She pretended to be interested in the papers and books he had pushed to the far end of the table.

"Why the urgent work all of a sudden?" she asked.

"Well, you see, it's like this," Dementiev began rather hesitantly. "The time has come to put our work here on entirely different lines. It's a disgrace that we're still wasting more than half our timber harvest. . . ."

He broke off, afraid he was boring her with what must sound terribly dull stuff to her.

"Go on, I'm listening," she said. "We're still wasting more than half our timber harvest. Go on."

He realised he had misjudged Anfissa, who naturally took all this lumber camp business as much to heart as he did. He gave her a grateful smile, and throwing caution to the winds, held forth on what was uppermost in his mind.

"Take just those fires alone! And our tremendous losses in rafting, re-sorting and sawing. . . . I'm very much afraid that posterity will call us some very refined names for our poor management. They'll say, what sort of asses inhabited the planet in the middle of the twentieth century? And mild as the word is now, it'll be more insulting than the longest string of curses used today. . . . Anfissa, do you ever think of those generations to come, who'll take over from us and judge us fairly and squarely for the way you and I have lived and for the things we have done?"

"Not really," Anfissa admitted. "It never occurred to me somehow. . . ."

"But it does to me, and pretty often too. When I make a decent job of something I always think: they'll approve of that, and whenever I bungle something I feel I'd be ashamed to face them. It helped me when I was a student, it sort of gives you a greater sense of responsibility. . . . All the praises we sing ourselves now will die with us, and all that will remain of us will be our deeds by which our descendants will judge us and pass

sentence on us, final and irrevocable without right of appeal! They'll praise us for good deeds, but they'll claim from us in full for our timber blunders. . . . I haven't frightened you too much, have I?"

"What's it got to do with me?" Anfissa shrugged. "I only take down the phone messages, it's you who'll have to answer for everything."

"Oh no, we'll all have to answer, our entire generation. . . . There's so much to be done here, we can't begin too soon. We're going to trim off the branches but not the crowns, and haul the trees out of the forest like that. It doesn't sound like much, but a lot will change at once: the girls will have an easier job, our output of commercial timber will go up about 5 per cent, and we're not going to burn anything. The older men here are not very keen, but it's obviously a paying proposition; it will give us a net saving of roughly half a million rubles a year."

"Half a million rubles?" Anfissa gasped. She had never before heard such huge sums of money mentioned so casually with such easy familiarity. Until now she had only associated them with newspapers and radio broadcasts.

"No less! And that, mind you, with what our planned output is now. We'll take on bigger commitments next year, and the profits will go up accordingly."

"Accordingly?" Anfissa liked the smooth, dignified sound of the word.

"Yes, of course," Dementiev confirmed this enthusiastically, grateful to Anfissa for taking such a lively interest in his work.

They smiled at one another, delighted that the reorganisation Dementiev had started on was going to bring in such huge profits, and even more so because they understood each other so well.

"And that's only the beginning!" Dementiev said, getting carried away. "The waste we're burning up now can be made into lots of useful things. Mark my words, Anfissa, this place will grow into a regular town with sawmills, a paper factory, a technical school and maybe even a college. . . ."

Suddenly he understood that what he missed all the time he was working on his plan and trying to overcome Ignat Vasilyevich's resistance, was these eyes—attentive, a little surprised, and though strangely reluctant to believe him, believing him all the same. If he had seen those eyes more often, he would have had Ignat Vasilyevich where he wanted him ages ago, he would have long completed his plan and it would have been even more watertight than it was now. The plan, that was nothing! If he had those eyes looking at him for, say, a year or two, he'd be sure to bring off something so outstanding that even the most hypercritical generations to come would think well of him a hundred years hence. . . .

"We'll push the chemical industry ahead. . . . And we'll build a theatre in our town to rival the regional one. . . . You'll be the star in this theatre, and you'll send me a ticket to your favourite play for old times' sake. . . . An usher in uniform will bring it. . . . You won't be too conceited to send it to me, will you?"

"I'll bring it myself," Anfissa said. "Let's not breed snobbery in our new town!"

"Oh, splendid! May I have another cup, please." Dementiev watched Anfissa pouring out the tea with frankly adoring eyes: she made a lovely picture of a young housewife anxious to do the right thing.

"D'you know, we're not unlike a newly married couple now!" he said.

"Don't joke about such things," Anfissa said with superstitious fear.

She thought that by saying what he did Dementiev was speeding up matters and was breaking those somewhat old-fashioned rules of the game which they were observing as though by mutual consent. True, Anfissa had never followed any rules very strictly in her life, but now she gladly took refuge in them, as though afraid to face things.

She did not quite understand what was happening to her. It used to bore her stiff to hear anyone talk about his work, but now she could go on listening to Dementiev for hours. And his eloquence had nothing to do with it. This straightforward,

honest man appealed to her more and more, and she knew she'd be fascinated by anything he chose to talk about. Even if he'd plunge into the intricacies of timber chemistry and expound to her the mysteries of wood-pulp hydrolysis or some such thing, she'd still think it more exciting than the most thrilling of the love stories Vera was always reading. . . .

Anfissa washed the cups and put them away.

"You're to keep your crockery and food on the top shelf, and your books on the bottom one. And don't mix them all up, I'll come and check," she warned him.

"I promise not to mix everything up!" Dementiev looked into the cupboard. "Anfissa, you're a wondergirl!"

"Wondergirl, and no mistake!" Anfissa muttered happily, looking no older than Tossia.

"Do you like sitting in front of the stove?" Dementiev asked hopefully, and quickly added to suggest the answer to her: "I've loved it since I was a child."

"Sitting how?"

"Like this."

He turned a stool over on its side, opened the door of the stove, and put out the light. They sat down on the overturned stool, their shoulders touching. The flames snatched out of the darkness their knees, Dementiev's cheek and Anfissa's small perfect ear. The logs crackled with a homelike, cosy sound, a velvety darkness filled the corners of the room, and time seemed to stop.

Anfissa looked content, as though she had at long last found where she truly belonged. She was not posing or trying to charm Dementiev. She had never once experienced anything like this feeling of serene happiness with any one of the men she had been intimate with. She saw it clearly now that though they had come into her life, they never touched the chord that was hidden deep down in her heart, and the very existence of which Anfissa herself had never suspected until just recently.

She could not abandon herself to this new, joyous feeling completely, because there were things she could not forget, because she was aware all the time of a terrible threat hanging

over her like an enormous rock that might come hurtling down at any minute to destroy her insecure happiness.

However her later life shaped, Anfissa would always remember this evening: her tidying up his cluttered room, his infectious, boyish confidence that there was a way out of everything, their washing their hands with the melting snow, their family tea drinking, Dementiev's talking about their descendants, and the two of them sitting together on the overturned stool, gazing into the fire. But most of all she would remember her sense of belonging to that world of big, important thoughts and feelings which until then had been outside her reach. Maybe she had been blind to the real values or perhaps she had honestly believed they did not exist. However that may be, Anfissa simply could not waste those precious moments on analysing her past blindness.

People had been too hasty, it seems, in relegating Anfissa to the ranks of the vamps and parasites, shallow and hard, incapable of love. . . .

"I'm getting roasted," Anfissa said, rubbing her knees. "Shall we move back a bit?"

They got up and moved the stool farther away from the fire.

"What about your urgent work?" Anfissa suddenly remembered.

"There's plenty of time I have till morning," Dementiev said light-heartedly.

"Let's move back a little more," she said.

"Yes, let's beat a retreat!" Dementiev said, glancing over his shoulder.

They smiled at one another and moved the stool back. Everything they said now, even the simplest, the most ordinary words were imbued with a special, secret meaning they alone could understand.

"Life is a funny thing," Dementiev said pensively. "To think that only a short while ago I knew nothing about you at all. I simply had no inkling that you were living in the world!"

"And made love to your student girls," Anfissa said.

"Not really, only so they wouldn't call me a hermit, you've got to believe this, Anfissa! I must have known subconsciously that I would find you one day, and girls meant nothing to me, we sort of met on uncrossing planes. I lived there, and you lived here and knew nothing about me either. Strange, isn't it? Now that we've met, all my life before seems to me no more than a prelude to this. I never believed in fate, but now." He took her hand. "Anfissa!"

"Don't," she pleaded softly, and freed her hand with a gentleness strange to the old Anfissa.

She gazed spellbound into the fire, as though seeking in the blazing logs an answer to all her fears and doubts. Unconsciously, she wanted to prolong this happy moment, the happiest in her life, when everything was already clear but their love not put into words and she need not fear for the safety of this fragile happiness of hers yet.

"What luck that I should have been appointed to this particular camp! And isn't it strange that the first person I met here was you! Say what you may, Anfissa, but it *is* fate!"

He took her hand and kissed it.

"Oh, why do you do it?" Anfissa said with tears in her eyes, and started to her feet. "I must go."

"Are you angry? Do forgive me, I didn't mean to offend..."

"Offend? It's so beautiful, it frightens me. ... I must go. Don't see me home, there's no need. Thank you, Vadim Petrovich."

"What for? It's you. ..."

"For everything."

Anfissa made a sweeping gesture that took in the room, the blazing fire, everything. ...

The front door banged. Someone bumped into the wall, swore drunkenly and began to grope for the door into the room. Anfissa switched on the light and looked at Dementiev in alarm.

He gave her a reassuring nod and strode to the door. He actually wished there was some terrible danger threatening Anfissa, so he could rescue her and thus prove that she was safe with him.

Dementiev threw open the door. Freezer tripped on the threshold and lurched into the room. Shivering from the cold, and with a piece of plaster stuck to his bruised chin, he made a sorry rather than a frightening sight. Dementiev stepped back, his hopes of astonishing Anfissa with his great courage and devotion dashed.

Shuddering, Freezer rubbed his hands, and started talking in a voice so loud he might have been shouting across the road.

"I say, Pyotr Vadim. . . . Dammit, Vadim Petrovich! Sorry to be bothering you at home, but have a heart for a working man, lemme have twenty-five bucks till payday, will you? It'll be as safe here as in the bank." He slapped his pocket. "Ask Anfissa here, she'll tell you. . . ."

He gave Anfissa a broad wink, asking her to support him. She turned her back on him without a word. Her rudeness to his nocturnal guest embarrassed Dementiev somewhat. He fumbled in his pockets for the money, and handed Freezer a note.

"Sporting of you! Understanding, I'd call it," Freezer said approvingly in a more cheery tone, and hit his chest with a fist, blue from the cold. "You may be an intellectual, but you do understand a working man!"

Anfissa picked up the slide-rule from the table and pretended to study the markings on it. She ignored Freezer, afraid he might start talking and would give her away without meaning to, perhaps. How she wished she could fly away to some far-away blessed land, where not a soul for a thousand miles around knew anything about her.

Freezer started for the door, crushing the note in his hand, when suddenly he stopped short, half-way. A thought strayed into his befuddled mind to do Dementiev a good turn to show that he wasn't ungrateful and also to take Anfissa down a peg or two for acting the great lady and snubbing him.

"Look, you don't have to be so fussy with her," he said patronisingly with a jerk of his chin in Anfissa's direction. "Honest, you make me laugh! Why, it's only Anfissa, she's a good sport! Begging your pardon, of course. . . . Go straight to her tele-

phone room and do what a man is supposed to do. Good old Anfissa never says no."

Freezer wanted to thump his chest for greater effect, but he missed and his fist landed in his arm-pit.

Dementiev did not quite understand what his drunken visitor was talking about, and was therefore quite unimpressed. He only marvelled at the depths to which a drunken man could sink. He was sorry he had let Freezer in, because that made him partly to blame for letting this dirty lie be said about Anfissa.

"Get out!" he ordered Freezer, and looked stealthily at Anfissa.

There was no visible change in her, she was as beautiful as she'd always been, and yet what he saw was a different Anfissa, a complete stranger. There was something forlorn, pathetic and trapped in her lowered head, drooping shoulders, and her whole attitude of a cruelly broken reed. She kept her eyes downcast. And suddenly Dementiev saw a resemblance in her to the shivering, miserable Freezer.

Still in a fog, Dementiev took a step towards her, hastening to her rescue. He was sure they need only be together, and everything would be all right. But Anfissa shrank away from him, cowering as though she expected him to strike her. Their eyes met. Anfissa averted hers quickly, but not quickly enough. In that short moment Dementiev realised, not with his mind, perhaps, but with his heart, that Freezer had not lied. It was not Freezer he believed, it was the whipped-dog expression in Anfissa's eyes.

And suddenly Dementiev saw all their past meetings in the pitiless, glaring light of this impossible truth. In a flash he understood Anfissa's evasive answers, her lack of faith in their coming happiness, the jeering looks of the lumberjacks which he had now and again intercepted, and the whispering which followed him and Anfissa whenever they walked down the street together.

Anfissa knew she had given herself away. She grabbed her squirrel coat and dashed out of the room.

"She can't take criticism," Freezer said, grinning.

"Get out!" Dementiev yelled at this man who had unthink-

ingly destroyed his short-lived, blind happiness. He gripped Freezer by his narrow shoulders, shook him so that his cap rolled off, and flung him towards the door.

"I'm going to put in a complaint," Freezer said with unexpected dignity, in a perfectly sober voice. "One son of a bitch hurls me against a telegraph pole, another tries to break my bones against the door jamb. . . ."

He opened his clenched hand and looked at Dementiev's crumpled note. Freezer was dying to fling the money into the man's face, but his common sense told him to squash his pride.

"They'll pull you in for abusing authority," was all he said.

Dementiev took a threatening step towards Freezer, who quickly picked up his cap and slipped out of the door. He could be heard swearing foully in the hall.

"That's an intellectual for you," he grumbled. "Wasting all that state money on teaching you. . . ."

The outside door slammed, and a silence, so oppressive that it started a ringing in his head, descended upon Dementiev. The spruced-up room, tidied by Anfissa, seemed to be waiting to see what he would do next. And there was the overturned stool they had left lying on the floor to remind him of the happiness that had inhabited this room only a few minutes before, and was now gone forever.

And he, the blind fool, had confided in her all his thoughts about the coming generations, had told her all his plans and had talked of fate, too! He sent the stool flying with a kick, crumpled all Anfissa's pretty paper doilies into a ball, and pushed it into the stove.

Ilya Pleads with Tossia

A great many changes were made in the course of that winter. The trees were now hauled away with their crowns, and only the men who felled the trees and adjusted the chokers on them worked in the forest.

The girls did their trimming at the upper depot now. A place

had been cleared for them to work in, and instead of burning the branches they stacked them in neat piles. Vera and her team had moved to the lower depot.

Tossia was the proud boss of a trailer, stationed at the upper depot. There was a tiny kitchen in one half, and a small dining room in the other, where the lumberjacks could have their meals in warmth and comfort, so many at a time. Someone had written in chalk on the outside: "FALL TO IT" Restaurant, run by Tossia Kislitsina.

The February sun was blinding in the little kitchen where Tossia was busy cooking dinner. Everything there was brand-new, sparkling and gay: the white paint on the walls, the gleaming pots and pans, the knives and ladles, and the smart little clock ticking away very nicely on the shelf. But Tossia, wearing a stiffly starched apron and a huge cook's cap that kept slipping down over her eyes, looked sulky and even dejected amid this cheerful brightness. She was slicing bread, engrossed in her gloomy thoughts. The soup was bubbling merrily, quite indifferent to Tossia's unhappiness, filling the kitchen with a tantalising smell. Tossia paused in her bread cutting, took a tablespoonful of salt from a neatly labelled jar, dashed it into the soup and glanced at the clock. She had to hurry, she saw. She put the bread on platters and stacked clean plates in the serving window, where dangling from a nail in the hatch was a never used book of complaints and a new pencil nobody had ever found the need to sharpen.

Tossia went into the diner. There was someone asleep on the bench in the corner, covered with a sheepskin coat. A pair of legs in felt boots with red rubbers over them protruded from behind the iron stove. Tossia put the platters of bread on the tables, added a log to the fire, and glanced in displeasure but not surprise at the boots.

From the upper depot came the whistle of the little "cuckoo" engine. Tossia looked out of the window over the short curtain, —the miserly caretaker wouldn't give her enough chintz—and said loudly to the felt boots and rubbers: "Ignat Vasilyevich has come!"

The boots and rubbers immediately hit the floor, and the sheepskin coat slipped down to reveal Churkin's sleepy countenance. That man remained true to form no matter how much things changed!

"Pitch in, fellows!" he shouted in a voice husky from sleep, and made a dash for the door.

Tossia poured some warm water into the wash-stand, and hung up a clean towel. Next, she unlocked the enormous padlock on the cask of drinking water, emptied the kettle into it, and secured it with the giant lock again.

The alarm-clock rang. Tossia took a critical look at her diner and herself, tacked down a loose corner of the wall newspaper, straightened her cook's cap, pushed open the door, and pulled the rope of the bell hanging above it.

Its clear, musical peal floated towards the forest. Tossia listened to it, thinking how happy it would have made her in days gone by, and with a broken-hearted sigh returned to the kitchen.

* * *

The men were coming from the forest single file along the snow-trodden path. Fil with a large black eye and his astrakhan cap perched on his head at a jaunty angle was the leader. A cigarette that had long gone out dangled from his lip, and the pocket of his jacket bulged with something wrapped in a newspaper. Behind him trotted Freezer, his hands pushed into the sleeves of his jacket for warmth. He still had a bruise on his chin and from afar it looked as if he had started growing a goatee. Behind them strode Ilya in a cloth cap that was quite out of season.

Fil stopped to light his cigarette and Ilya caught up with him. They walked on side by side but did not talk. There was complete silence except for the crunching of the snow under their felt boots and Freezer's wheezing. Fil found himself trying to get into step with his one-time pal.

Ilya saw the lighter in Fil's hand, stuck a cigarette in his mouth, slapped his pockets as if feeling for matches, spat a shred

of tobacco, and said gloomily: "Give us a light." Fil measured off five steps or so in silence, and then, without looking at Ilya, handed him the lighter. Ilya lit his cigarette and offered the light to Fil. Their eyes met, and they both at once exhaled a cloud of smoke.

"I say, Fil, don't be mad at me," Ilya said gruffly.

Fil stroked his black eye as proudly as if it were a scar he carried from some glorious battle.

"Mad is not the word," he said uncompromisingly, taking back his lighter and putting it in his pocket.

"Oh, come off it," Ilya said to end hostilities.

"We're so high and mighty! Ours is a pure love!" Fil mocked in a high-pitched voice. "And who's Fil? Just a larrikin, he can take a beating and like it! Just try to remember who started this thing. Wasn't the bet your idea? Ha, you don't care to answer that one, do you!"

"It was just one of those things," Ilya muttered. "I saw red. It can happen to anyone."

Fil stroked his black eye again with more pride than before.

"And then you had to smash Freezer's chin, and poke Longlegs into the snow. . . . You're making a laughing-stock of your mates. . . . At this rate, no one in this town will be afraid of us soon. . . ."

"But why d'you want people to be afraid of you?"

"Don't you preach to me, I hear enough of that stuff from Sasha," Fil said angrily. "To hell with Longlegs, he's here today and gone tomorrow. But you and I, we used to be pals, and you went and hit me." Fil's voice shook with the insult of it. "I never thrust myself on you, remember that."

"All right, we'll make it quits. Here, hit me!" Ilya offered his cheek to Fil, who clenched his fist and swung, but then he changed his mind.

"Are you a baptist or something? Listen, I don't hit love-sick fools, let them die of it in their own good time," Fil explained with a note of contempt in his voice. "But if you put on your high and mighty act with me again I will hit you sure enough. I don't care that you're the stronger."

He tugged at the parcel in his pocket, ripped the newspaper off and held out Ilya's deerskin cap to him.

"Take your cap. I don't want what doesn't belong to me."

Ilya moved away and rubbed his frozen ears.

"You won, so go ahead and wear it."

"Going noble on me again?" Fil asked furiously. "It's all Tossia's handiwork." He turned to Freezer: "Hey, come here."

Freezer trotted up to Fil, holding his clenched hands in front of him.

"Why d'you shiver so all the time?" Fil asked with aversion for this blue-nosed creature, pulled off his shabby cap of artificial fur, flung it into the top branches of the nearest tree, and put Ilya's deerskin on his head.

"See that you don't shiver any more," Fil said sternly.

Ilya was smoking hard and, in spite of himself, admiring the angry and generous Fil, black eye and all. Say what you like, but personally he didn't know many chaps in their town who'd willingly part with an expensive cap like that. So, this is the stuff Fil, the notorious larrikin, was made of! Tossia was hard on him because she did not know him well, and he was deeper than he looked. Ilya would make it up with her one day, and then he'd tell her all about Fil, to whom he was bound by many threads of friendship, both good and bad. . . .

"What now?" Fil asked suspiciously, looking at Ilya's face which became kinder for his secret thoughts. "First you give me a black eye and now you're ogling me as if you'd like to kiss me. I know your sort! Go on, run to that sweetie of yours, she's rung the bell already. . . . So now we've got bells, damn them! Baptists, the lot of you!"

Fil gave Ilya a shove, and watched him hurry to the trailer.

"And he used to be one of the best too!" Fil summed up mournfully.

"Got under a woman's thumb, that's what he did," Freezer put in quickly, to curry favour with Fil, and straightened the gift so unexpectedly bestowed upon him.

"Shut up!" Fil snapped at him, reserving exclusive right to criticise Ilya.

He looked at Freezer, a sorry thing in that gorgeous cap. "Ugh, what a mug for a swell cap!" Fil waved in disgust.

* * *

Tossia spared no effort to instil habits of hygiene in the lumberjacks who came to her diner.

"Wash your hands before dinner. There's warm water and everything," she reminded them every day.

Ilya spent a full five minutes scrubbing and drying his hands, and only then approached the serving window. Tossia glanced at his reddened hands, poured him a plateful of fragrant pea soup, and gave him a large piece of soup meat so the brute shouldn't think she was mean enough to starve him. Ilya smiled sadly but did not go away. To get rid of him Tossia forked up another piece of meat, a bit smaller than the first, doing one of the late comers out of his portion of proteins and calories, and put it in Ilya's plate. Still, he did not go, and smiled more grimly than before.

The other lumberjacks came up to the window one after the other, got their soup and hurried to the tables, while Ilya remained riveted to the spot.

When at last all had been served, he poked his head into the window.

"Listen, Tossia, forgive me . . ." he said huskily, forcing out the words with the difficulty of a man unused to begging anyone's forgiveness.

"I don't know you from a hole in the ground," Tossia replied, staring past Ilya and stirring his soup nervously.

Ilya sighed heavily, realising how difficult it would be to make her see reason.

"Try to understand, I'm not like that any longer!"

Tossia snorted, thinking this another of his shabby tricks.

"You'll hold up a bank or kill someone and when they catch you you'll wail: I was a bad boy then, I'm good now, let me go and give me a medal, besides! Is that how you see it? It's only lizards that can shed their tail when you step on it, but a man

has to stay the way he is all his life. He's only got one conscience and no spares."

"Gosh, you're difficult to talk to!" Ilya moaned.

"Don't then, who wants to talk to you?" Tossia said, and turning her back on him, began to fuss with her pots and pans.

Katya came rushing into the diner, stopped to have a drink of water out of the padlocked cask, and then coughed loudly to remind Tossia of their old arrangement. Tossia waved at her angrily to let her be.

Fil came up to the serving window.

"Wash your hands," Tossia said crossly, but a look at his black eye made her add with a shade of apology: "Does it hurt, Fil?"

"That's my worry," Fil replied with dignity. He tasted a spoonful of his soup, smacked his lips and said: "Too much salt again. There can be nothing worse than a love-sick cook."

He took his plate to the farthest table and sat down with his face to the wall to spare himself the sight of their best lumberjack grovelling before that chit from Voronezh. Who asked her to come here anyway? They all lived in peace and quiet until she came and made a quarrel between him and his best friend.

"Don't mind him, he's got a grudge," Ilya said to justify Fil's churlishness, and poked his head into the window again. "Tossia, forget all about that bet. . . . It makes me laugh to remember it."

Tossia became taut, like a cat about to pounce.

"It makes you laugh, you say?"

"Well . . . it makes me despise myself."

"It does?"

"Well, ashamed. . . . Oh, don't pick on my words. If you don't believe me, give me a trial."

"D'you think you're a tractor or something? I'll never forgive you! You and your dirty goings on! I hate you, I hate you, you hear?"

"You're beautiful when you're like this," Ilya said dejectedly, and walked away.

"Go on!" Tossia gasped.

Ilya pushed the door open with his shoulder and left, forgetting

all about dinner. A large, childish tear rolled out of Tossia's undisciplined eye and plopped into Ilya's soup, exactly between the two pieces of meat. Katya was coming, and so to hide her unpardonable weakness and explain away her swimming eyes, Tossia quickly picked up an onion and began peeling it.

"Don't cry, Tossia," Katya said with feeling, poking her inquisitive head into the window. "You did right to send him packing. I'm proud of you again. . . . All women would be proud of you!"

"Don't be an idiot. Would I cry because of him? The idea! It's this onion, it's awfully strong, must be from the state farm."

"Why?" Katya was bewildered.

"Why, state-farm onions always make you pour tears, they're much stronger than collective-farm onions. All cooks know it. . . ."

A tear plopped on Tossia's hand, and unable to bear its bitter weight, she dropped the onion, pressed her face to Katya's shoulder and let the tears flow.

"Why should I cry? I don't care for the brute at all," she whimpered.

The next group of lumberjacks came for their dinner.

"Get a move on, will you," Semechkin, the small tractor driver, grumbled. "Lunchtime will be over soon."

And as always when Tossia was in trouble Katya was the loyal friend coming to her rescue. She blocked the window with her body and let no one look into the kitchen.

"The cook's had an accident, so you'll have to wait a minute."

Old Friends and Lovers

Anfissa finished work and paused on the porch for a minute. Towards evening it had turned very cold. The entrance door to the canteen, fitted with a hard spring, banged and banged for all the town to hear as it admitted more people. Others were hurrying to the club, mostly in couples.

She did not feel like going to the hostel. Lately she had been finding it difficult to be among people.

Lack of privacy never used to bother Anfissa, but now

she found the company of her inquisitive room-mates a strain. She was too proud to let them see how miserable she was, and so she had to act a part all the time, and she was sick of it. It was a good thing she had something of a gift for acting.

Going to the club with its dancing crowd appealed to her even less. It wasn't much fun standing on the porch and attracting notice either, and so she ran down the steps and started aimlessly down the street.

As she turned into a side street, to avoid meeting people she knew, she ran into Ilya, who was trying to make his way unnoticed to the men's hostel. Engrossed in their own thoughts they passed one another, but then both stopped at once.

"Hello, Ilya," Anfissa called to him. "Or don't you know me any more?"

Ilya looked about him, afraid that Tossia might see him with Anfissa, and this instinctive precaution made him furious with himself and even more so with Tossia for making him such a coward. He took a deliberate stride towards Anfissa.

"Don't be scared," Anfissa said with condescension and only a very slight shade of mockery, reading all his cowardly thoughts. "She won't see us, she's at school. . . . What about you, why aren't you there?"

"I'm through with school." Ilya made a gesture with his hand, crossing out his recent attempts to live a model life. "But why are you so blue? I hear the new engineer is crazy about you."

"You're way behind the times, Ilya dear. People have enlightened him about me, the kindly souls."

"So that's how it is. . . ."

They were in the same boat, he saw, and felt sorry for the poor girl. His case wasn't so bad: he still hoped that the proud little Tossia would forgive him, but Anfissa, it seemed, had already lost hope entirely. Queer that life should bring him and Anfissa together again, when they had drifted so far apart, by throwing this flimsy little bridge between them.

And again, as in the old days, Ilya involuntarily compared Anfissa and Tossia, but this time he felt something like enmity for the younger girl. She was too clever by half. She had every-

one trying to help her, while no one offered Anfissa a friendly hand when she was in trouble, no one even sympathised with her.

What were the two of them supposed to do now, he and Anfissa, cut their own throats or something because in the past they had blundered in their ignorance and not managed to keep themselves as pure as saints? It was easy enough for Tossia and Dementiev to condemn them! One of them had spent his whole life studying, hatching his engineer's diploma in that high-hat incubator till he was almost grey-haired, and the other, being only seventeen, hadn't had time to go wrong yet. Both of them, the jealous Dementiev and the virtuous Tossia, were a couple of the worst sort of prigs, whose only worry was to walk through life without soiling their shoes. . . .

Katya and Sasha appeared round the corner, seeking the darkness of the side street. Sasha was playing his accordion, and Katya, clinging to his arm, was singing a ditty:

*With your big grey eyes on me,
I don't want to disagree. . . .*

As she passed Anfissa, Katya asked with a drop of venom: "Old love's true love, yes?"

Anfissa was at a loss for a cutting reply.

"Aren't you too old to play hooky?" was all she said.

"We've had a break, our teacher's sick," Katya said as pleased as a schoolgirl. She turned to Sasha and finished the verse:

*But you'll do just what I say
When my brown eyes tell you nay.*

"Some people have all the fun!" Ilya said enviously. "There seems to be a curse on you and me. Everything with us is upside down: when we didn't love anyone, we had fun, but since we've been in love it's been sheer torture. God, life's twisted, honestly, it's like a crankshaft."

"Yes, you certainly got into a mess with that bet," Anfissa said.

"A hell of a mess! D'you think she'll ever forgive me?"

"Who knows? She's not a small-minded person, really. I must say, there is something in her after all."

"There, you see!" Ilya was delighted by Anfissa's long overdue recognition of Tossia's worth, but it was a shallow victory because, small-minded or not, Tossia drove him away like a mangy cur and refused to understand that it was one Ilya who made that bet and quite another who now had to foot the bill. If she loved him she'd understand a simple thing like that.

"Why don't you try and explain things to her nicely," Anfissa advised him. "I never knew you were a coward, Ilya. Are you afraid of her or what?"

"Anyone would be! I thought she liked me at first, but there's no getting near her now. She's got a block of ice for a heart."

"It's all pretence," Anfissa said. "Just don't let your own heart freeze. Prove it to her that you love her, that you'll do anything for her. Well, give her a present or something."

She talked to Ilya in the patient, kindly and patronising manner of someone who was at least twenty years his senior. Ilya welcomed her suggestion, but immediately saw it wouldn't work.

"She will never accept anything from me. You don't know her," he said with both condemnation and involuntary admiration of Tossia's hard-heartedness.

"Try anyway," Anfissa insisted, honestly wanting to help Ilya out of the mess. "She has a sharp tongue, but she's got the mentality of a child, and then she's never had presents lavished on her. I know she's dying to have a watch, but it must have a thick glass. . . ."

Dementiev and the caretaker with a new portrait under his arm walked past them on the way to the club.

Dementiev looked at them and, recognising Anfissa, turned away sharply as if the sight hurt his eyes.

"This is what it's come to," Anfissa said bitterly. Her hands flew to her throat and tugged at her scarf as though it choked her.

Her pain stabbed at Ilya's heart and opened up his own, unhealing wound. Loving Tossia and being rejected by her, he understood what Anfissa must be going through. His first impulse

was to dash after Dementiev and bring him back by force, but a look at Anfissa made him stay where he was.

There was something so vulnerable and defenseless about her, and not a trace remained of the town's glamour girl and vamp he used to go and visit at night only a little while ago. Her self-confidence and flippancy had vanished; she seemed to be listening to something no one but herself could hear. Ilya could hardly believe that she was the girl he used to fool around with.

He was thinking that he did not really know Anfissa well, although they had been friends for over a year and there had been everything between them there could be between a man and woman. He had simply regarded her as a very beautiful girl it was fun to be with. He liked dancing with her at the club and was flattered by the hard, envious stares of the other chaps to whom she had preferred him, Ilya. Thinking of the life he used to live, he marvelled how little he had needed to feel happy. He did not live at all, he saw it now, he simply vegetated.

His trials, it seemed, helped him to better understand himself and others too. And perhaps what really happened was that Tossia, without knowing it, had awakened his slumbering emotions and power of understanding.

He had a vague yet overwhelming sense of guilt towards Anfissa, as if he was somehow to blame for her break with Dementiev. "If she doesn't make up with him, I'll never have Tossia either," a superstitious thought flashed across his mind.

"Listen, Anfissa, don't hate me too much if something wasn't . . . quite . . ." Ilya said softly.

Anfissa's hand flew to her scarf again, but paused half-way.

She took a step back, and looked at Ilya with her old, gaily malicious expression.

"How gallant of you!" she sang out mockingly.

"You don't have to use a screen with me," he said reproachfully.

The sympathy and understanding in his eyes were too much for Anfissa, and she turned away. Ilya was thinking that if there had been no Tossia in this world, he could love this newly discovered, shy and quiet Anfissa. A tiny jealous regret slipped

across his subconsciousness that it was not he but another man who was responsible for the change in her.

Everything would be quite different, it would be quite unlike their love-making in the telephone room. Maybe he was tired of Tossia's quirks and whims, and he longed for a simple and heart-warming happiness.

"It seems we're two of a kind," Anfissa said, apparently reading all Ilya's secret thoughts and thinking the same thing.

The idiots, why didn't they fall in love with each other, instead of taking their love elsewhere and causing themselves so much suffering.

"You'd better go before your sweetheart catches us," Anfissa said anxiously. "She's in Katya's class, you know."

"Let her," Ilya said bravely. "I don't care. She's had her way long enough."

He suddenly wanted to match Anfissa in everything. Dementiev has just snubbed her, very well, let Tossia do her damndest too. He and Anfissa would watch and see, and then they'd decide which of the two prigs deserved the prize.

As a challenge to the priggish Tossia and to the world at large, Ilya took Anfissa's arm and led her out of the dark side street into the brightly lit main thoroughfare of the town. He walked with Anfissa right in the middle of the street for all to see, friends and enemies alike.

"You're the old Ilya again," Anfissa said. "I love it when people revolt."

"You'll see, we'll have our day yet," Ilya said confidently.

What he wanted more than anything in the world just then was that Tossia should see him strolling with Anfissa. She had caught them talking in the corner that payday long ago, hadn't she. But now that he wanted her to catch them she was nowhere in sight.

Ilya took Anfissa to the hostel and stood talking to her for a while on the porch. He talked loudly enough for Tossia to hear if she was in her room. Still, there was no sign of her.

Either because his pain had worn off with the passage of time, or because he was heartened by Anfissa's friendliness, or simply

because it was bound to happen, whatever the reason Ilya suddenly saw himself with another's sober eyes and asked himself why on earth was he crawling on his belly before a silly kid? He suddenly realised, without quite believing it yet, that he was breaking free from the unwanted love that had swooped down on him out of a clear blue sky, binding him hand and foot. He seemed to be recovering from an illness he had invented for himself.

Afraid that this precious feeling of liberation might be shattered, Ilya quickly said good night to Anfissa and started back home. With every step the invisible but strong hold Tossia had on him weakened. He had played the fool long enough! There were all sorts of experiences in store for him yet, and he must have been insane to believe that she was the only pebble on the beach.

He wanted to sing for joy that he had at last thrown off the yoke he had carried too long. Ilya couldn't break into song in the middle of the street, but he did shout his favourite "Hey-hey!" not very loudly. In response, a dog barked in Churkin's yard, and Ilya walked faster, ashamed of this puerile glee which was quite unsuitable for a strong man who had just strangled his love so successfully.

Ilya strode on jubilantly, and before he knew it he found himself in front of the school. Lately, he had often come here of an evening, and had even stamped out a circle under one of the classroom windows. Annoyed that his legs had brought him there, he was about to turn away, but then he decided to take one more look at Tossia with his new, no longer enthralled eyes, and try to understand, though somewhat late in the day, what had attracted him to her, why he had fallen so hard. He wanted to grasp the cause of his malady thoroughly in order to insure himself against any such idiocy in the future.

Through an eye in the frosted glass Ilya saw the classroom and the overage pupils packed like sardines behind the small desks. He saw Tossia. She was sitting all by herself at the back of the room behind *their* desk, diligently writing something in the thick exercise book he knew so well,—a small, prim girl

who did not love him but who was still the dearest person in the whole wide world.

All his mutinous thoughts tumbled out of his head at once. The invisible rope tightened and bound him more securely than ever. He saw with amazing clarity that he was tied to Tossia for now and for ever, and no matter how he deceived himself and no matter what rubbish he made up in his anger and frustration, he could never get away from Tossia, just as he could not get away from himself.

Vera and Tossia Make a Pact

The generous March sun drew everyone out of doors. There was a crowd of lumberjacks, dressed up in their Sunday best, walking about in front of the girls' hostel. Sasha, surrounded by a bunch of singing girls, was playing the accompaniment on his accordion, and Katya's clear voice rang above the chorus.

The eaves of all the roofs bristled with melting icicles. As the drops of water made the plunge they flashed in the sunlight like tiny, blinding lights.

Tossia ran up the porch steps and stopped, squinting in the glaring sun. She was conscious of an intangible change in everything, as though the world about her had shifted its accustomed position. She peered about her. The sky was still whitish as in winter, but the horizon had already broadened noticeably, the air had become thicker and more fragrant, and it hurt to look at the sun. A fanciful thought occurred to her that the globe with all its continents, oceans, forests, towns and deserts, with all the fine and rotten people who inhabited it, revolving round the sun as it was supposed to do, had this very minute crossed some invisible line and rushed head on into Spring.

So, she wasn't to see the Northern Lights that winter. . . .

A lorry was coming down the street, the same lorry that brought Tossia here last autumn. Among the passengers—all of them girls going to town to get a perm done by a certain hairdresser famed throughout the district—was Ilya, sitting glumly

in a corner. For a fleeting moment their eyes met. Ilya quickly looked away, and Tossia, with a carefree air, jumped two or three times to break off a pretty icicle, failed to reach it and slipped indoors.

She pushed the door into their room and stopped short on the threshold. In front of the stove stood Vera, her coat undone and her head scarf pushed back, holding an unopened letter in her hands and obviously in two minds about throwing it into the fire. With a startled look at Tossia, she flung out her hand, held it in mid-air for a moment as though it had met an invisible wall, and then reluctantly threw the letter into the fire.

"What's up?" Tossia cried worriedly. "You amaze me, Mummy Vera! Are you sorry for him or something? Don't you believe the brute. He's lying! I can see from his writing he's lying!"

"What are you talking about?" Vera feigned bewilderment.

"What, what, what!" Tossia exploded. "I hate secretive people! Look how you used to fling the letters into the fire." She made a quick flipping motion with her hand. "And now." Tossia slowly described an arc. "You can't fool me!"

"You're always imagining things," Vera said in some confusion.

"I am? I like that! I suppose it's my imagination too that you cry yourself to sleep every night?"

"Please shut up," Vera begged, and sank wearily on to her bed. Tossia sat on the edge and put her arms about her. For a moment they switched roles, and it was Tossia who now did the comforting and the mothering.

"Don't, Mummy Vera. Keep your chin up like me." Tossia straightened up and thrust her chin out, showing Vera how she should meet the blows of fate. "Come on, don't take it so . . . after all, no one's been making love to you on a bet."

Tossia was only human, and she was already beginning to brag a little of her sufferings.

"Ah, Tossia child, there are worse things than betting."

Tossia was very, very doubtful about that.

"Was he, how d'you call it, unfaithful to you?" she asked, gently stroking Vera's shoulder.

"If he had loved the woman at least, but it was just a cheap flirt like our Anfissa. It was a casual sort of affair, what men call 'for the record'. He soiled our marriage. And I loved him so, I believed him so, fool that I was! I'll never trust anyone as blindly again so long as I live. . . . I've got over it a bit now, but at the time I really lost faith in people, in the whole human race."

Tossia looked at Vera in awe.

"You mean you thought they had all become a head shorter, so shabby you hated the sight of them all, yes?" she said softly.

"How do you know?" Vera asked in surprise.

"I just do," Tossia said evasively, priding herself on the fact that she, too, had experienced the same sort of emotions as Vera, a married woman and a correspondence student to boot. "And that brute of yours, did he blubber and beg: let me prove to you I'm a good boy now?"

Vera gave her a puzzled look, it was really uncanny, one might think Tossia had overheard her last conversation with her husband.

"Yes, something like that. . . ."

"They all do," Tossia said knowledgeably. "They do the foulest things, and when you catch them they start crawling and whining: 'You're beautiful, you're beautiful.' Before then they saw nothing but your faults. Oh, I hate such people!"

Tossia cast a quick, angry glance at the door, as if expecting to see the man who had done the foulest things and who had stubbornly refused to see how beautiful she was.

"I went away as far as I could to forget him, but it hasn't helped," Vera continued. "I can neither forget him nor forgive him. . . ."

"It certainly isn't easy on you either," Tossia handed it to Vera with some magnanimity. "You did right to leave him. But why does he write and write?"

"I haven't read a single one of his letters," Vera said with a furtive glance at the fire. The letter was no more, but the ashes still retained the shape of the envelope.

Tossia followed Vera's look and gasped.

"Oh, Vera! Don't give in to him." Tossia took a breath and asked her as an equal: "Do you ever dream of him?"

"Not very often. . . ."

"It's not too bad then," Tossia said in an authoritative tone. "But d'you know what mine does? He comes to me in dreams every night! He took a night off two days ago, but last night he was there again. . . . I dreamt we were on a boat. Fancy picking on a boat in the middle of winter. The fool! I haven't been turning my pillow for two months now, but I still keep dreaming of him. . . . He has no pride at all!"

"The things you think up!" Vera said, forgetting her troubles for a moment. "It's you who are dreaming of him, you know!"

"Sure, that's what I was saying," Tossia mumbled, and then it dawned on her. "Oh, I see. . . . You mean it's my own fault that I dream of him?"

"You probably think about him a lot," Vera said tactfully.

"That's not true!" Tossia protested vehemently. "I never think of him at all! If I see him, yes, I do think of him a little bit. And that's all. . . . No, it's something else." She closed her eyes and admitted: "I think I'm sort of . . . sorry for him." She looked guiltily at Vera, and said: "I hate him, I despise him, and yet I'm sorry for him. That's a woman's heart for you!"

In Tossia's voice there was profound contempt for herself and her despicable weakness.

"Gosh, how I hate our female breed, I've no words to express it! We wouldn't miss a chance to pity some brute for jam! Honestly!" Tossia sat up straight and said brightly: "Never mind! You can please yourself, but I'm never going to forgive him. Never! I'll throttle the soppy woman in me, but I'll never give in to pity. Let's do it together, shall we? We'll help each other: if you show signs of weakening, I'll rush to your rescue, and if I do, you hurry to me. . . . Together, we'll make short work of all the brutes! It's hard doing it by yourself," she said with a plaintive whimper. "They just won't leave you in peace! Is it a pact?"

Before Vera could answer, the door flew open and Katya danced into the room, singing a gay tune.

"Who wants *her*?" Tossia muttered. Katya took off her head kerchief and threw it on her bed.

"Oh, girls, it's so warm outside, it's real spring! Everyone's there, it's such fun! And you two are sitting here, talking secrets!"

"You wouldn't understand," Tossia said gravely.

"Why not? I don't think I have less sense than you."

Tossia shrugged.

"Sense has nothing to do with it. You're happy, Katya, and happiness is blinding."

Vera looked at Tossia in amazement, thinking: "How suddenly she has become grown-up!"

Katya tied a plain cotton kerchief under her chin, and started for the door.

"Come here a minute," Tossia called her back. Katya obeyed. Tossia pulled off the plain kerchief framing Katya's radiant face, opened the wardrobe door, which never gave so much as a squeak after Xan Xanich's lavish oiling, searched through the things kept there as if they were her own, found a brightly patterned kerchief, and arranged it very becomingly on Katya's head.

"Sasha will take one look at you and fall dead!" Tossia pushed Katya towards the door, and only then turned to Vera, who had taken no interest in the proceedings, to ask: "May I, Mummy Vera?"

Vera nodded absently. Her hand on the door handle, Katya turned and looked at her woebegone friends. And suddenly her own ordinary but cloudless happiness appeared to her a gross thing, almost obscene.

"Vera, Tossia, would you like me to stay?" she offered with a break in her voice. "Am I to blame that everything is going so well with Sasha and me? We met and fell in love, and as soon as they give us a room we'll get married. . . . We've never even quarrelled once!" Katya said in a small voice, despising herself for being happy in such an unspectacular way. "Shall I stay?"

Katya began to unbutton her coat, quite willing to make this sacrifice.

"Go on, go on, we can manage without you happy ones," Tos-

sia said, flatly refusing to allow this humbug to join them and, under false pretences, wallow in their lofty sorrow.

Outside, Sasha began to play a tune, telling Katya to hurry up. She dropped her eyes, buttoned her coat, and thievishly slipped out of the room, ashamed of her secure happiness.

"Like a needle and thread," Tossia said disapprovingly, and shook her head like an old woman. "Such is our lot. . . . What don't those brutes make us do! And it's we who are to blame, we alone. We had history yesterday, and do you know what? There was a time when women ruled the world! They ruled in everything! A very, very good idea, I think, only I've forgotten how it was called. . . . What a stupid nut!" Tossia gave her head an angry slap.

"D'you mean the matriarchate?" Vera said.

"Why, you know about it too?" Tossia was amazed at this discovery. "We had them right here, the darlings!" She clenched her fist savagely. "But those ancient softies had to take pity on them, of course, and set them free!" Tossia said with profound regret. "If we had it now, this matriarchate thing, wouldn't I give a certain person the works! Wouldn't I just!"

At first, Vera paid no attention to Tossia's jabber, but it was so childish and absurd that gradually her gloomy thoughts were dispelled, and she smiled. It was impossible to listen to Tossia and brood: one thing excluded the other.

"Ha, love!" Tossia exclaimed bitterly. "The lies they've written about it! When I was small I always thought it was sweeter than honey, but actually it's more bitter than mustard!"

"You're too young to say that," Vera said.

"It's always like that: at first you're too young, and then you're too old, you're never the right age."

"You're growing wise," Vera said, marvelling.

Tossia waved her hand, dismissing the suggestion.

"So you're disappointed in love?" Vera asked, her curiosity roused at last.

"Yes, I am disappointed," Tossia agreed readily, childishly proud that what she was feeling had such a dignified, bookish sound.

"Have you lost faith in Pushkin as well?"

"Oh well, Pushkin," Tossia was at a loss. "Look how long ago he lived! But nowadays . . ." she made a hopeless gesture.

"You're taking Anfissa's view now, are you?" Vera asked sternly. This comparison with Anfissa placed Tossia in a quandary.

"Anfissa says there's no love at all, nowhere in the world. . . . And I . . . I don't know, maybe there is love somewhere . . . but not here, I guarantee!" Tossia thumped her breast solemnly.

"You know, I've decided never to marry anyone," she said, confiding her latest secret in Vera. "To hell with all that! We'll be bosom friends, you and I, and we'll get along just fine. You'll see. Whose crazy idea was it that everyone's got to love someone? Honestly, what for? It's just imagination, that's all it is. I can make my own living, and then supposing he turns out to be a drunkard or something, and I'll be landed with him for life! It's less trouble living alone, don't you think so, Mummy Vera? If I want to eat sweets, I can eat sweets, if I want to eat gingerbread, I can eat gingerbread."

Tossia ran to her bedside table, poked inside, and found her last remaining mint cookie. She generously gave half of it to Vera and chewed on the other half herself.

"I like the mint ones best because it saves you the trouble of cleaning your teeth," Tossia announced her discovery made a long time ago.

Her tone was as earnest as when she spoke of love and the matriarchate. Vera could not help smiling at this amazing and lovable child. She was thinking that without this scatter-brained youngster life would be more difficult and her old wound would hurt more. Before she got to know Tossia, Vera always believed that the only people worth liking were the intelligent and the well-educated ones, and the main reason why she fell in love with her husband was because he had such elegant manners and knew so many foreign words. Why had she become so attached to Tossia, then? She couldn't be called a downright fool of course, but then she wasn't particularly brainy either. She was wise in heart, perhaps, rather than in mind.

"What now?" Tossia asked suspiciously, and once again it amazed Vera how sensitive she was to a change of mood.

"How is . . . how's Ilya getting on?"

Tossia choked over her mint cookie.

"He's getting on, I suppose. He's by himself, and I'm by myself. We came to a parting of the ways. . . . I thought he'd be broken-hearted, but he doesn't even look at me! He's just an unfeeling block of wood! He's given up school, and he doesn't even come in to eat. He got so skinny, so hollow-eyed," Tossia sighed pityingly and added with sudden fury: "He wants to spite me, that's all. Sort of, you're the cook, so I'll show you, I'll become skin and bones to spite you and put you to shame. . . . I can see right through that villain!"

"How terribly young you are!" Vera said enviously.

"Of course I'm not a greybeard. . . . And another thing he does, every Sunday he goes to town! He doesn't care if there's a blizzard or anything. That's only to spite me too, to show me he's bored here. Even if he does have a new girl in town, what's it to me? Maybe he thinks I'll weep my eyes out, no fear, I won't! Breathing's easier without him here, the air's purer. . . . The mechanic's wife saw him at the jeweller's. Any other man would be ashamed, but not this one, no. Ogling gold trinkets, that's what he does! Honestly, what a man!"

"There's no pleasing you," Vera said. "He came to ask your forgiveness, but you chased him away. . . ."

Tossia inclined her head with great dignity to confirm this.

"Now that he's left you alone, you're grumbling again. What do you want him to do?"

"How am I to know? He shouldn't have made that bet."

"That's all past now. . . ."

"Oh no, it isn't!" Tossia cried stubbornly. "I'll never forgive him as long as I live! What does he think I am . . . a wooden stool?" Viciously, she kicked Xan Xanich's masterpiece.

"Tossia child, you're all tied up in knots," Vera said with motherly tenderness.

"I am a bit, just a bit." Tossia showed the tip of her little finger, and then said brightly: "So it's a pact, right?"

"What pact?"

"Aren't you dense!" Tossia cried in dismay. "Haven't I given you a solid hour's pep talk so you'd never dream of forgiving that husband of yours?"

"I didn't notice," Vera said, smiling.

"Put the thought of him out of your head, like I've kicked Ilya out.... And the next letter that comes, let's do it this way: you don't have to read it, I will, just as a favour, and then I'll tell you what's in it. After all, we've got to find out what he's writing about. Throwing them all into the stove is not right either; in our country every citizen has the right to correspond!" Tossia stated with conviction, giving her own interpretation to that particular paragraph of the Constitution. "Agree? Is it a pact?"

Tossia held out her hand, palm up. Vera wanted to hug the child, so firmly convinced since infancy that if you made a collective effort you could overcome any trouble. She couldn't, though, for fear of hurting her mentor's feelings, and so she merely shook Tossia's hand, gravely and solemnly, as befitting the occasion.

"I don't have to worry about us now.... Look out, you brutes!" Tossia challenged her foes, and poked her head under Vera's arm.

They sat in a close embrace, swaying in time to the song coming from outside. Through the window they could see the icicles melting faster and faster, the drops of water flashing in the sun as they fell.

Vera glanced into the fire out of the corner of her eye. The burnt-out logs had sagged, and the ashes of the letter were scattered.

On the Old Ski-Track

Early that same Sunday morning, Dementiev buckled on his skis and went off to inspect the distant part of the forest which it was planned to fell next.

This virgin forest was rich in century-old pines. They stood tall and straight, all perfectly matched, and never suspected that they were doomed. Dementiev found himself admiring the growing trees and at the same time seeing them neatly stacked at the lower depot, and the two pictures did not clash. "An engineer's attitude to nature," he decided, and before starting back to town tentatively chose the site for the loading operations.

His bachelor room appeared most uninviting on a fine day like this. If anything, it was more of a pigsty than ever. Subconsciously, he had been slovenly, as though to spite Anfissa. All a man could do in a place like that was sleep, write reports to his superiors and maybe drink vodka. None of these pastimes appealed to Dementiev just now, and he was sick and tired of simply staying there to show people he was living as good a life as anyone else.

He followed no particular direction, letting his skis take him where they would. Soon he came out to the river. Once he had crossed it his step became firmer, the tracks left by his skis much straighter. He seemed to know where he was going now, though he still refused to admit it. Pushing his way through a coppice, he kept left until he emerged at the depression which Anfissa had once told him was famous for its mushrooms.

Places where he had once been happy drew him irresistibly. He remembered reading when he was a student that this only happened to elderly people when they wanted to review their whole past life. "Oh, well, I must be getting old," he thought.

They had passed near here somewhere with Anfissa. Dementiev looked about him, and there, right under his feet, he discovered an old ski-track, snowed over and barely discernible. He was certain it was Anfissa's, miraculously preserved from their first outing. There had been plenty of snow in the last three months, but the trees provided shelter and the tracks may well have been preserved. He had skied down the open slope and so his tracks were naturally obliterated.

Miracles did happen, of course, even in our atom age. True, not very often, but they did. After all, Dementiev was not asking for some staggering miracle that would shake the foundations

of the universe, all he wanted was a small one, of no more than local significance.

He followed the old track, skiing beside it and taking care not to step on it, not to trample on his happy memories. It disappeared in snowdrifts every now and then, but it invariably came up again, clearly marked on the frozen snow crust. It seemed to be struggling against oblivion, fighting to keep his memories alive.

When he came to the spot where Anfissa had introduced him to the peculiar echo, Dementiev stopped and called out. It answered at once. It had waited there those three long months, hiding in the thickets. No matter what happened to him in life, Anfissa's queer echo would always be here so long as the forest remained, and he could come here and call it, he thought gratefully. It was comforting to know that there were some changeless, lasting things in this world, impervious to gossip, slander and other such evils that wrecked people's lives.

A fresh ski-track crossed the old one, ran on, but turned back at once to continue beside it, diligently copying all its undulations. What a great pity he had never been taught the art of those famous pathfinders Petya was always reading about! Who had passed here, when? He was strangely convinced that whoever it was had passed here just ahead of him. The odd thing about it was that this person had also taken care not to step on the old tracks. Dementiev ventured a guess which he hastily dismissed, he dare not believe it could be so.

Instinctively, he put on speed. He was going faster and faster, and suddenly, but not really surprisingly, looking down from a hilltop he saw Anfissa slowly moving below, along the fringe of the forest.

This place, with its happy associations for both of them, seemed to draw her too.

He caught up with her. The old ski-track made an insurmountable barrier between them. It was a reminder both of their short-lived happiness and of what had come between them.

For a long time they skied on in silence, broken only by the swishing of their skis, the crisp knocking of their sticks and

occasionally the muffled thud of a ball of snow, dropping from a sagging branch. The snow on the trees had become flaccid and it fell in a lump with no sprinkling of snow dust as on that day long ago.

Dementiev feasted his eyes, starved for her, on Anfissa. She was not at all like the image he carried of her. Her features were the same and as familiar and dear to him, but now they appeared more simple and severe than he remembered them. Actually, he did not think she looked so very beautiful. The discovery was heartening, because from the moment he first saw her the thought that he was too ordinary-looking for her had never stopped haunting him.

Never for a moment, though, did he forget the thing that had come between them. And yet, strangely, the sordidness did not soil Anfissa, it just existed as a thing apart. What Freezer said had not happened to this Anfissa whom Dementiev still loved, and loved more passionately than before perhaps, but to someone else, a stranger he cared nothing about.

He did not know how to explain the confusion in his mind. Maybe it was always like that with beautiful women, and beauty was always in the right even when it besmirched itself? Was he so terribly in love with her that his love cleansed her of all dirt and he saw her the way he wanted to see her? Or maybe the thing that had come between them was much less important than he thought, too trifling to justify the torment he had been through?

Anfissa dropped her head lower and lower, and turned away from him as far as she could. Suddenly, it dawned on Dementiev that his silence and his scrutiny were insulting to her. Her plight was much worse than his, he ought to have remembered that.

"The snow's nice and hard today, isn't it?" he hurriedly said the first thing that occurred to him, cursing himself for the carefree lilt in his voice.

Anfissa stopped dead, cowering as from a blow, and stuck her sticks into the snow.

"The weather's another nice topic, Vadim Petrovich," she said darkly.

Dementiev stopped too, and stuck his sticks in the snow beside Anfissa's. He believed they were standing on the very hilltop from which he once invited her to admire the snow-clad forest. He made a deliberate step towards her, trampling the old ski-tracks sacrilegiously, and gently took her hand in both of his. Her scarf matched her gaily coloured mittens. He imagined what a thrill buying this outfit must have been for her, and her love of pretty clothes, which no longer excited him or her, suddenly appeared to him as a sweet and almost childish trait.

"I kept thinking about you all this time, Anfissa," he said, gripping her hand tighter, afraid that she would run away without hearing him out. "I called you names and cursed you, why conceal it? It was so sudden, I was knocked out flat. After all I'm only human, I am capable of jealousy and other such rot. . . . Only human, and the realisation is bitter sometimes. Anfissa, forgive me for all my vile thoughts, forgive me for giving you up so easily."

"I'm not blaming you for anything," Anfissa said, staring hard at the nearest pine tree and not seeing it. "Not for anything at all," she repeated in a firmer voice.

"But you should! I'm older, and I should have done the thinking for both of us, instead of indulging in my stupid, jealous ravings. A lumber-town Othello, what a farce! If we take a sane view, you are not guilty towards me of anything. After all, all that," he fluttered his fingers in the air and dropped his hand at once, afraid he might be hurting Anfissa with the flippant gesture. "All that was ages ago, when you didn't even know I existed. Right?"

"Right," Anfissa said, hope creeping back into her voice, and looked straight into his face for the first time.

Where did he get the crazy idea that she wasn't so very beautiful? She was as lovely as ever, only now her beauty was more mature, more dignified, and less tawdry. It was as if she had absorbed it and now it glowed from within.

"You see?" Dementiev cried eagerly, as if it were Anfissa and not himself he had been trying to convince with all his intricate

logic. "If I had come here earlier there wouldn't have been anything. . . . But no, I had to get a higher education, the damned idiot!" He swore at himself with relish.

"You're so good," Anfissa said in a hollow voice, and turned away to stare at that blessed pine again.

"I still believe that there's a way out of everything! You and I will find a way out, won't we?"

"Don't be too hasty, I don't want you to regret it afterwards."

"Look, let's ask the echo. It won't lie to us," Dementiev suggested brightly.

"Oh no, no," Anfissa begged in a panic, pulled her hand free, and took a step towards the descent into the hollow.

She stood poised on the edge for a moment, and then pushed off. Dementiev watched her fly down the steep slope with beautiful ease, her bright scarf fluttering in the wind, beckoning him to follow.

The trees cast long, thin shadows down the treeless slope. Anfissa flew across the shadow line and was now in the clearing, flooded with the brilliant sunlight of early spring. And in that instant, the featureless clearing assumed a new and terribly important meaning for Dementiev: it had waited there for milleniums, languishing in obscurity only so that it could welcome Anfissa one day, and spread itself obediently at her feet.

Anfissa was speeding away from him, and he had not told her the one thing that mattered. The correct decision only came to him as he watched her fly down the slope, though it had begun to ripen in his mind long ago. He dashed down the slope, and overtook her at the far end of the clearing where another line of tree shadows began.

"Anfissa, I've thought everything out," he said, panting, and pushed his hat back with a devil-may-care gesture. "Let's go away from here, so nothing will ever remind us. . . . Let's go to the other side of the Urals, eh? The farther, the better. We'll get married here, to shut up all the gossips, and leave the place as man and wife. Where we go no one will know anything. And I'll never reproach you with anything. I swear it, Anfissa, never!"

Anfissa was mechanically tugging at the ends of her scarf. She simply could not seem to believe that her dream was coming true. The sight of her, so grateful, so willingly thawing, hurt his eyes. He bent down to pick up a heavy fir cone.

"It's for Petya's collection," he explained gruffly.

A fear he could not understand flared up and died in Anfissa's eyes. She came closer, and clung to him timidly as though seeking protection from herself.

"Dearest, you're so good, why did it have to be me. . . ."

She closed her eyes, rubbed her cheek against his, and quickly sprang away from him. She shuddered as if she suddenly felt cold in the bright midday sun.

Nadya and Xan Xanich Plan Their Room

The prudent Xan Xanich wanted to be fully armed against the day when the coveted rooms would be allocated at last. Late one evening he persuaded Nadya to come with him to the unfinished building and choose their room, provisionally of course.

"It'll be more use than just tramping the streets," he said reasonably.

They went through the whole building, taking their time about it. In the darkness, the beam of their flash-light would flicker across a room mysteriously, go out, and flicker again in the next room.

Someone was playing the accordion in an undertone down Kamchatka way, a girl was laughing softly, and a breaking young baritone was saying something with an insistent plea. And from the lower depot on the river bank came the whistles of the small "cuckoo" engine, the clanging of buffers, the clutter of logs, and young voices shouting excitedly.

"They don't seem to be getting anywhere," Xan Xanich grumbled. "At this rate, they'll keep us waiting till autumn."

The beam of light flickered across the skeleton room, fell on Nadya's face for a moment, travelled on to the building refuse heaped on the floor and thickly powdered with snow that came in through the paneless window, and showed up a big gaping hole in the ceiling. Xan Xanich measured the room with his steps.

"It's fourteen metres square, and the window faces south. How I'd love to have this room, Nadya dear. It does make me want to settle down!"

"It's big," Nadya said. "They won't give it to a childless couple."

"You never know," Xan Xanich said in mild protest. "You're childless today, and just the opposite tomorrow. Isn't it so, Nadya dear?"

"I'm always forgetting to ask. . . . Are you fond of children?"

"Not very, if they're just any children," Xan Xanich admitted honestly. "But I'd love a boy or girl of my own. . . . Our own flesh and blood, so to say. . . ."

From outside came Dementiev's angry voice. It was coming nearer.

"D'you call yourselves builders? Taking a whole week to finish the roof, and even then it's not finished!"

Xan Xanich switched off his light with guilty haste and stepped through the door opening, pulling Nadya by the hand after him. Dementiev and the elderly building superintendent stopped outside the room with the southern exposure, which Xan Xanich had liked so much.

"You're not fair to the builders," the superintendent said despondently.

"Fair or not, you listen to me," Dementiev fumed. "If you don't finish this building by May Day, I'll ruin your record for you."

"What's in a record? Mine's an ordinary builder's record: a hundred grammes worth of bonuses and a ton of trouble."

"This time there really will be trouble. If you don't finish it by May Day I'll kick you the hell out of here! And with the reference I'll give you, you'll never have to build another

house again. I'll get the District Party Committee's support if I have to."

"May Day, you say?" the superintendent asked in a business-like tone. "Could you give us a week's grace? You see ... it's against local traditions to build quickly."

"Not even one day! Work out some new traditions."

"That's easier said than done. . . ."

They walked away. Xan Xanich stepped back into the room and kicked the pile of refuse with youthful vigour.

"Did you hear him, Nadya dear? We'll be living like all decent folk soon! Vadim Petrovich may be young, but he's as good as his word."

He flashed his light about the room.

"We'll put the bed in that corner, and the wardrobe here," he said as confidently as if he had the key to these coveted fourteen square metres in his pocket. "There will be more elbow room then. . . . Let us go, Nadya dear, before somebody sees us, you know how people talk."

Xan Xanich helped Nadya through the yet unglazed window, and then scrambled through himself. From the outside he let the beam of his flash-light play on the walls of the room again. He simply could not bring himself to walk away so quickly from the house where his long awaited married bliss was soon to begin.

"We'd better push the table up to the window, Nadya dear. We can have our tea and look out into the street then, we'll have our private cinema show, so to say."

"I'd rather have it in the middle of the room," Nadya suggested. "Otherwise, the room will be sort of empty."

"All right, as you like," Xan Xanich agreed at once in his good-natured way. "We'll think about it, after all we're not moving in tomorrow."

They walked back to the hostel.

"She hasn't been here, Vadim Petrovich," the young baritone said loudly from Kamchatka.

Dementiev caught up with Nadya and Xan Xanich. He looked upset.

"Good evening. . . . I say, Nadya, have you seen Anfissa anywhere?"

"She must be working tonight."

"No, she's not there. . . . I wonder where she can be. . . . Thanks, Nadya."

Dementiev hurried away.

"He shouldn't go running after Anfissa," Xan Xanich said reproachfully. "She'll give him a bad name."

"What does he care about it!" Nadya said. "He loves her. . . ."

"Love's all very well, of course," Xan Xanich mumbled contritely, and then said with a worried frown: "I still think the ceiling's a bit low."

Nadya suddenly came up close to her fiancé, hugged him passionately and awkwardly, and kissed him on the mouth.

"Never mind the ceiling, Xan Xanich! Why wait? Let's get married soon, I've been getting sort of jumpy lately. . . . Let's go to the registry office tomorrow morning, shall we?"

Xan Xanich shuffled his feet, as always in moments of stress.

"But what sort of married life will it give us? With you living in one place, and me in another. . . . We waited so long, let's be patient a little longer, Nadya dear. It won't be long now, you heard what Vadim Petrovich said, didn't you?"

"Have it your own way, Xan Xanich, only. . . ."

Anfissa Pays in Full

In feverish haste Anfissa was throwing her things into an open suitcase. Tossia lay curled up on her bed, peacefully asleep amid a pile of textbooks, her literature book propped up to screen the bright lamp. Inadvertently, Anfissa touched her ornate mirror and sent it crashing to the floor. Tossia sat up with a start and rubbed her eyes.

"Oh, girls, what a wonderful dream! What are you doing, Anfissa?"

"Nothing!"

"What d'you want to move into another room for? Ours is nicer," Tossia said loyally.

Anfissa shook her pillow out of the pillow case which she then rolled into a ball and threw into her suitcase. "Why, you must be going away for good!" it suddenly dawned on Tossia. Walking soundlessly in her stocking feet, she came close to her, touched her arm timidly and said: "Don't go."

"You're too damned nosey. Let go of my arm."

"Then it's all because of me?" Tossia asked in a frightened little voice and shut her eyes tight. "If you love Ilya as much as all that, if you can't live without him, then it's me who'd better go. Shall I?"

Anfissa gave her an astonished, incredulous look.

"You'd do that? Oh, you're still such a silly child!" Anfissa said, envying Tossia her youth and innocence. "I've no use for your Ilya, you can keep him."

Tossia breathed more freely. Anfissa swept all her jars and bottles into the suitcase, and gave Tossia a bottle of scent.

"Here, take it, it's your favourite one, with the scratch."

Tossia meekly took the bottle and sniffed mechanically. Anfissa slammed her suitcase shut, and locked it.

"But what about Vadim Petrovich?" Tossia cried, aghast. "If someone loved me like that I'd never go away! How can you do it?"

"You're a good sort, Tossia. Yes, he loves me, and I love him more than life itself, and yet..." Anfissa kicked her suitcase.

"But why, why? They say he's forgiven you everything!"

"Ah, Tossia, Tossia!" Anfissa said despondently, and sank wearily on to her stripped bed. Tossia flopped down beside her.

"He has forgiven me my love affairs, but I've another surprise for him..."

"Oh, stop it! I hate people pretending they're worse than they are!"

Anfissa shook her head dully.

"No one knows, I'll only tell you. . . . It's like this: I'm to pay the wages of sin, so to say. I can never have children. Not if I live to be a hundred. Never! Last year I got rid of one, I went to a quack, everything seemed all right, and now there's this. . . . And so I'm not really a woman any longer, just an empty shell. . . . It all falls into a pattern, well planned too!"

Tossia was struck dumb.

"Frightened?" Anfissa asked with a bitter smile, and then said with belated regret: "Why did we have to quarrel all the time?"

She patted Tossia's shoulder gently with almost a mother's tenderness.

"Life has cheated me, Tossia, that's all. It looked so simple at first, and now it turned against me. I was such a fool, I always thought real love was a lie, a fairy-tale people made up to hide their beastliness. But now I know: there is real love, there really is. It's happiness for some, and nothing but suffering for me. . . . You know, it may sound funny and unscientific, but I keep thinking that because I always sneered at love, it sort of grabbed its chance and paid me back for all my old doings. . . . If someone had told me that I'd meet Vadim Petrovich one day, I'd have lived my whole life differently, I'd have waited for him. . . . But no one did tell me!"

"Maybe you could live without children?" Tossia asked softly. "People do, you know."

"You're too young to understand, Tossia. . . . Even if he does agree now, he'll be sorry afterwards, I know. He loves children, worst luck, he simply adores them. It's strange a man so young should dote on children the way he does. He's got it all tied up in his own way with the coming generations. Everything is against me, even the coming generations! It's fate. I've done enough damage already without ruining his life for him into the bargain. I wish I had never met him, honestly. I'd have gone on living like a wound-up doll. But now I've been given a taste of real life, only to have it snatched away at once: it's not for bitches like you!"

She buried her face in Tossia's lap. Quick, angry tears poured down her face. In one hand Tossia absently twirled the bottle of scent, and with the other stroked Anfissa's gorgeous hair. She did not know what to say to her, how to console her. Tossia remembered how much she hated and feared Anfissa such a short while ago, and her own blindness amazed her now. Anfissa jerked up her head.

"And it's all because of my looks, damn them! Men were always chasing me, even when I was only a schoolgirl! I'm not making excuses, believe me, but they were to blame too. . . . And now I'm left to answer alone. Is it fair?"

A deafening roar coming from outside and growing in volume drowned out her last words. The windowpanes rattled in fear. The tractor, rumbling heavily past the hostel, was secure in its right of a good hard toiler to jam Anfissa's wretched and sordid confession.

Anfissa stood up, brushed away her tears with a fist, and knotted her head kerchief more tightly.

"Now I've made you sorry for me. . . . But on the whole everything is as it should be: people must pay in full for their errors. That's what keeps the world going."

She picked up her suitcase and walked to the door.

"One more thing: Ilya loves you, I'm telling you the truth," she said, pausing. "He never loved me like that. If you care for him, stop tormenting him. . . . Well, so long, Tossia. Good luck."

Anfissa pushed the door with her suitcase, and went out.

Tossia flung away her scent bottle, found her rubber boots, pulled them on quickly, and rushed out after her.

The weather was foul that night. For a fraction of a second Anfissa appeared in the light of a street lamp in the distance, only to vanish in the murky darkness. Tossia ran past Xan Xanich and Nadya, walking up and down in front of their unfinished house, and raced to the office.

She flew into the building, so silent at night, ran past the closed cashier's window, leapt up the stairs to the floor above, rattled the handle of Dementiev's locked office door, clat-

tered down the stairs, stumbled and fell, cursing roundly, and rushed to the telephone room.

The girl with the ear-rings was on duty. She sat slumped in front of the switchboard, sleepy and listless.

"Where's Vadim Petrovich?"

"At home, I suppose. . . . Has there been a train crash?"

"No, worse . . . it's Anfissa," Tossia began to explain, but gave it up with an impatient wave of her hand, and dashed out of the room.

She ran all the way to Dementiev's place, and started banging on his window with no thought to spare the panes.

"Who is it?" Dementiev asked, poking his head out of the small hinged window.

"Hurry! How can you sleep? Anfissa. . . ."

The door banged, and Dementiev appeared on the porch, getting into the sleeves of his coat as he hurried down the steps.

"Anfissa's run away!"

"Run away?" Dementiev repeated, the news not sinking in.

"Well, why do you just stand there? Go after her if you love her!"

He started at a run to the street crossing where all those leaving the lumber town usually waited for a lorry to pick them up. Tossia trotted after him.

"Bring her back, Vadim Petrovich. . . . You're the boss, after all. And she loves you. . . . Better than life itself, she told me so herself!"

She stopped to get her breath back.

"Don't come back without her!" she shouted. "What d'you call it . . . yes, use force! Force, I said."

* * *

Anfissa was gone by the time he got to the crossing. The raw spring wind swung the crowns of trees and howled in the narrow street as in a chimney. Dementiev spent a good half hour there, peering impatiently into the dark for a lorry going his way. Not one was going to the station, though. All were coming from

there. At long last he saw one headed in the right direction. He raised his arm and waved, but the lorry flew past, spraying him with wet, dirty snow, and rattling its empty body.

He could not stand there waiting any longer and trusting things to chance. He ran back the way he had come, then on to the garage, and shook the man in charge awake. The man took some time to grasp exactly why the chief engineer should want the jeep in the middle of the night.

"On personal business, understand?" Dementiev said again and again. "I'll pay for the gas."

He drove to the station as fast as the jeep would go.

All the way there, Dementiev begged fate to grant him one thing only: to let him see Anfissa before she took a train. He was convinced that she just wouldn't be able to go after that. One look into his eyes and she'd understand how much he needed her, and whatever the reason for her running away, it would simply vanish of itself.

True to the garage man's warning, the rear right tyre went flat, and Dementiev had to stop and change it. Then he got stuck in the melting snow and mud, driving round the mobile electric station trailer abandoned by someone and blocking the road. And as a last blow, already on the outskirts of the town, he was held up for a long time at the railroad crossing.

A shunting locomotive was puffing and blowing on the siding, a pup was whimpering near the switchman's box, and the radio was going full blast in the small house with a huge sign-board on the other side of the crossing. This was such an anticlimax after jolting at breakneck speed to get here, that Dementiev had the sensation of suddenly falling out of life on one of its sharp turns. The urge to overtake Anfissa had rushed on ahead, while he himself was stranded with his jeep on some impossible island where time stood still.

The rails gleamed wetly behind the striped barrier. The railroad seemed incredibly wide here, compared to the forest narrow gauge to which he had become accustomed. As he sat waiting, the engineer in him remembered suddenly, and

much too inappropriately, that our railroad tracks were eighty-nine millimetres wider than those in Western Europe. He despised himself for thinking about such trifles at such a moment, but there it was!

Parking his mud-spattered jeep in the square in front of the station building, Dementiev hurried inside and came face to face with Anfissa who had just finished buying her ticket.

"Anfissa!" he cried out, and gripped her hand.

She was wearing mittens, the same brightly coloured mittens that had impressed him so on their last meeting in the forest. And the same scarf. All at once he was sure that everything would be all right.

"What happened?" he whispered. "We settled everything, didn't we. . . ."

They stood in the middle of the passage. People hurrying back and forth bumped into them, peered into their faces, and tried to catch Dementiev's words. The men of course ogled Anfissa, and the women carefully avoided looking at her. They appeared to be blandly ignorant of her presence among them, but for some unknown reason they looked stung, and wore the peevishly distressed expressions peculiar to women whose shoes are pinching their feet.

It was the first time that Dementiev found no joy in Anfissa's beauty. He saw it as a heavy cross to be borne through life not only by her but also by the man who loved her. He suddenly wished she was less striking, more like everybody else, so he could be with her in the most crowded places with an easy mind.

A tall man in a crumpled coat had taken a permanent stand about three steps away from them and was staring fixedly at Anfissa. Dementiev looked at him with hatred, and shifted to shield her from his lecherous gaze.

"Take it easy, Vadim Petrovich," Anfissa told him and turned to go to the platform.

Dementiev took her suitcase from her. Several passengers started to go after them, thinking the train had arrived and it was

time to board. Anfissa stopped in front of the beer and soft drinks booth, boarded up for the winter.

The tall man in the crumpled coat came and stood near them again. Dementiev, his fists clenched, lunged towards him, and the man turned and shuffled away, glancing over his shoulder at Anfissa.

"Oh, don't bother about that idiot," she said wearily.

Dementiev looked at her in alarm. She wasn't particularly overjoyed by his coming, it seemed. There was something strange, almost hostile in her new expression. It was as if she had left him forever, and he had forced her to return to what she had parted with for good.

"But tell me, what happened? I don't understand. . . . Is it something I did, perhaps?"

Anfissa shook her head slowly, avoiding his eyes.

"We settled everything, we agreed we'd marry and go away together. There is a way out of. . . ."

"No, Vadim Petrovich, not out of everything."

"But why, tell me why?"

"You're much too good for me, and enough's enough."

"You're talking rubbish, sheer rubbish!" he burst out. "You belong to me, I love you."

"And I . . . don't love you," Anfissa said in a low, steady voice, to put an end to this conversation which could not alter anything in her life.

"What?" Dementiev was stunned.

He forgot all his arguments, rehearsed on the way to prove to Anfissa by their incontestable logic that she could not leave, that she simply had not the right to leave him.

"I don't love you, that's all. D'you think everyone must fall for you simply because you're an engineer, with an honours certificate and everything. . . ."

"What nonsense is this, Anfissa? I don't understand, I thought you too. . . ."

"Oh, you thought, did you?" Anfissa cooed mockingly, easily falling into the part of the hard-hearted flirt, which in fact she

had been until Dementiev came to town. "I was . . . fooling! I'm the roving kind, didn't you know."

Dementiev looked at her searchingly: he had never seen her like this.

"I don't believe you, you're hiding something from me. . . . Why don't you look at me?"

"Don't I? All right," Anfissa said readily, cursing fate for making her run away from her love, and as if that were not enough, to defile it like this.

At odds with her flippant tone, she raised her head with difficulty, looked at Dementiev with dry, burning eyes, and even managed a smirk to make it more painful for herself. Completely baffled, Dementiev clutched at the last straw.

"But how can it be? Tossia told me you loved me. . . ."

"Huh! What an expert opinion," Anfissa snorted. "She doesn't know a thing about it. You might as well have asked your Petya!"

The train rolled up to the platform. The station bell clanged not very loudly. A sleepy man in striped pyjamas looked out of the window of a first-class coach, and yawned with great relish.

"What's this place?" he asked with the idle curiosity of a transit passenger.

Neither Anfissa nor Dementiev heard him. Silently, they walked down the platform. They were oblivious of the noise and bustle around them. Porters hurried past with luggage, a crowd of brawny, securely carefree skiers in childish knitted caps raced past to the end coach, train guards were busy fetching pailfuls of boiling water, people were kissing their friends and relatives good-bye, passengers sprinted to the station buffet with empty bottles in their hands. . . .

A huge old woman, bundled up to defy the fiercest cold, was brooding over a basket like a mother hen, yelling to attract customers in a voice so powerful that it rose well above the general din of the station.

"Pumpkin seeds! Pumpkin seeds! Two rubles a glassful! I'd eat them myself, but I've lost my teeth! Sweet pumpkin seeds!"

They reached Anfissa's coach. The bell clanged two times.

"Well, Vadim Petrovich," Anfissa said almost gaily as she took her suitcase from him.

"Anfissa!" Dementiev called out desperately. She really was leaving.

"What am I doing?" Anfissa thought in sudden panic. For a short, weak moment she wished Dementiev would use sheer brute force to make her stay. But she mastered her weakness, and quickly handed her ticket to the train guard.

"You'll find happiness yet," she said in a rapid whisper. "I've frittered mine away. . . . Don't think badly of me, Vadim Petrovich. . . ."

She looked into his eyes for the last time, memorising his face for ever afterwards, aware that she was giving herself away in that look. With hope suddenly reawakened, Dementiev held out his arms to her. She jerked away. A smart young naval officer, hanging on to the hand rail, leaned down to her.

"Come straight to our compartment, one of the lower berths is vacant," he invited her with smiling familiarity, examining her brazenly. "Let me relieve you of your suitcase."

He reached down for it.

"I'll relieve you, if you don't look out!" she spat out at him with murderous hatred.

The young officer sprang back, making room for Anfissa to pass.

The train began to move. Dementiev walked beside Anfissa's window, striding faster and faster.

"Please write. . . . Your address. . . . I'll come. . . ."

The train gathered speed, and Dementiev ran to keep up with it. Now it was really off, and the coaches sped past, cheerfully clicking their wheels. The train guards stood on the steps, protecting the peace of their passengers and little concerned with his misery.

"Your address . . . Anfissa!"

The clicking of the wheels died away. The rear light gave a wink in farewell and slumped sideways into the darkness of

Dementiev trudged back to the station.

"Sweet pumpkin seeds!" the vendor yelled out behind him. "Pumpkin seeds, bursting with vitamins! Three rubles two glassfuls, take what's left! Pumpkin seeds!"

No Watch for Tossia

Tossia sat in front of her open geography book, holding on to the ends of her head kerchief with both hands. Vera was in bed, reading. Katya was busy embroidering a tobacco pouch for Sasha, but her curious gaze kept returning to the strangely subdued Tossia.

"It's so hot, why don't you take off your kerchief?" Katya said solicitously.

"I've a headache. . . ."

"I wonder where Anfissa is now?" Katya thought aloud.

Tossia looked at Anfissa's deserted corner. The bare mattress sprawling on the bed was like a mute reproach to all of them; the door of the ownerless bedside table gaped open: inside was an old powder puff, an open jar of cranberry jam, and an empty lotion bottle lying on its side—all that remained of Anfissa.

The letters danced before Tossia's eyes. She unfolded a map at the back of the textbook and bent low over it. She stared at the Pacific Ocean, so tranquil and blue on the map, so coldly indifferent to Anfissa, Tossia, and all their woes.

The silence was broken by the clatter of an overturned pail out in the corridor. Someone knocked softly on the door. Katya, too lazy to answer, looked at Tossia, expecting her to call out as she always did. But she remained stolidly silent, her eyes glued to the ocean.

"Knock louder!" Katya called out. "Are you weak from hunger, or what?"

Ilya walked in, looking as smart and dignified as on that memorable night when he came to invite Tossia to th

True, he wore a plainer cap and his self-confidence had waned somewhat.

Tossia pulled her kerchief lower over her forehead and pressed her palms to her ears, so that no uninvited strangers should bother her with their empty chatter when she was busy. She kept her eyes pinned to the map, vigilantly watching the Pacific Ocean to see that it didn't run away.

"I say, girls, couldn't you go for a walk, I've got to talk to Tossia," Ilya said in a strained voice.

"What next!" Katya said grumpily, and looked hard at Tossia, waiting for her to give some sign whether to go or remain.

Tossia spread out her fingers, pressed to her ears, and bent even lower over the map. Vera went out into the corridor, taking her novel along with her. Katya followed her, but in the doorway she stopped and turned.

"Tossia, we'll be close by if you want us. . . ."

Ilya glared at her, and she shot out of the room.

Tossia, nose glued to map, traced new ocean routes on it with her finger. Ilya came to stand behind her, studied the pattern on her kerchief for a minute or two, and then gently tugged at her geography book. She clutched at it and pulled it back.

"You'll tear it," she hissed, engrossed in the study of Oceania.

Ilya tugged harder, and Tossia, thinking of the safety of school property, let go of the book. Deprived of her protective occupation, she slowly raised her head.

"Close your eyes," Ilya said with something of a stammer, and put his hand in his pocket.

"Why should I?"

"Come on, close your eyes, don't be scared."

"No one's scared of you. . . ."

Tossia closed her eyes and just to be on the safe side pushed out her elbows, remembering the much-experienced Anfissa's instructions. Ilya quickly produced a small box from his pocket, took the watch out and placed it on New Zealand. Tossia opened her eyes.

"Oh, how tiny! Whose is it?"

"Yours . . . so you'll have dinner ready on time," mumbled Ilya, shuffling his feet in embarrassment.

He never imagined it was such a hell of a job giving a watch to the girl you loved.

Tossia was fascinated by the pretty watch. The glass was thick, a magnifying glass it was—her dreams were coming true! She pressed it to her ear and listened. There was nothing forbidding about her now. Her frank, childlike delight brimmed over and poured out of her eyes at Ilya.

"It's ticking!"

Ilya brightened up, and with a sigh of relief reached for his cigarettes. He felt he had at long last traversed the most hazardous mountain pass in his life and was now embarked on a straight, level road that led to happiness.

And Tossia, trustful again, slipped back her head kerchief, revealing the secret which she had taken such pains to conceal from the girls. She had had a perm, to rival Anfissa in looks, and now, with the modish hairdo, she did not look like herself at all.

"Like it?" she asked hopefully.

Ilya did not know what to say.

"I paid thirty-four fifty for it!" Tossia said boastfully.

"It's not bad," Ilya said without much enthusiasm.

"I knew you'd like it!"

Tossia put the watch on her right wrist and strutted up and down the room, thrillingly conscious of her stylish hairdo and the first gift of jewelry in her life. Ilya beamed, watching her, and Katya, who was peeping through the keyhole, had to stifle a giggle.

"You should wear it on the left wrist," Ilya said.

"I know, I simply forgot," Tossia said to cover her unpardonable ignorance, and undid the band.

Katya's booming cough made Tossia start. With a trembling hand she covered her watch, shielding it from imminent danger.

Ilya sat down on Anfissa's stripped bed and lighted a cigarette to let Tossia enjoy her strutting in peace.

"Who asked you to make yourself at home?" she demanded with a quick frown.

"Oh, drop it." He smiled and winked at Tossia, thinking it was all part of a game.

"Get up at once!" she ordered, and slammed shut the door of Anfissa's bedside table.

Slowly, Ilya got to his feet. She tugged at the band to undo it.

"Tossia, don't!" he called out in despair.

"It's too expensive," Tossia said, holding the watch out to him.

"Not for you. . . ."

"What does it matter who it's for. I'm not going to take it, and that's that," Tossia said with determination, burning her bridges.

She was furious with herself for falling for the lovely watch and being so easily bribed into forgiving him everything. She wanted to throw it on the table, but took pity on the innocent thing, and gently put it down on her open geography book.

"So you're not going to take it?" Ilya asked with an ominous note in his voice.

Tossia shook her head, carefully looking away from the watch lest she should fall into temptation, and pushed her geography book with the watch on it towards Ilya.

"You ruined Anfissa's life, are you after mine now?"

Ilya frowned.

"Is she always going to stand between us? And I'm not to blame, you know."

"None of you are to blame, you're only good at passing the buck. . . . All right, get going!" She waved her hand, showing him the door.

"All right!" Ilya roared. He threw the watch on the floor and ground it with the steel-tipped heel of his boot.

Tossia watched Ilya, appalled. He strode across the room, kicking chairs and stools out of his way, slammed the door, and sent another pail clattering in the corridor.

Alarmed by the noise, Vera and Katya came running in. Tossia was sitting on the floor, picking up the broken bits. Tears were running down her face.

"Did he hit you?" Vera asked.

"Why, who cropped your hair like that?" Katya said in dismay, examining Tossia's ridiculous hairdo.

"Oh, girls!" Tossia whispered, getting to her feet and dropping the bits and pieces she had picked up. "Why, girls, I love the brute!"

She flopped across the table, plunged her unbecoming hairdo into the serenely indifferent blue of the Pacific Ocean, and howled.

Xan Xanich and His Room. Tossia Goes to Kamchatka

April came to rule the town. It nibbled at the snowdrifts, bared the earth on rises and hillocks, deepened the blue of the sky as in summer and lifted it higher up. The footpaths, which had been walled in by huge snowdrifts, bulged like roughly thrown-up dikes, now that the flaccid snow had thawed and sagged on either side.

Xan Xanich, his face flushed with excitement, was pottering on the front porch of the new house, fixing a lock on the front door. He looked jubilant and at the same time a little guilty as if ashamed of himself for being so sublimely happy.

A *subbotnik* was on. About thirty people had volunteered to work free of charge on their day off to help with the long overdue completion of the house in which Xan Xanich and Nadya were promised a room. They were laying the floors, putting the doors on their hinges, glazing the windows, and fixing the electric wiring. The place was a bustle of cheerfully noisy activity, not too efficient perhaps, which is always the case when there are more people than the job calls for and most of them new to it. The superintendent, who had shouted himself hoarse, was dashing about in a vain effort to bring some sort of order into the work.

The loud, measured banging of the hammer coming from above was like background music to the chorus of voices, the clatter and the din.

That was Ilya, working all by his gloomy self up on the roof, nailing down the boards which Fil and Longlegs carried up to him.

Tossia's job was to warm water and mix clay in a trough—practically a cook's job again, worse luck—and in her spare moments help Vera sort out the bricks which Nadya and Katya then carried away in a barrow.

Xan Xanich caught Nadya's glance and with a look loaded with meaning indicated the door lock—that tangible symbol of their soon-to-come married life. Nadya quickly nodded in response, glad not so much for her own sake, it seemed, as for his that he had lived to enjoy that longed-for moment.

The greatest crowd was working in the room which Xan Xanich wanted for himself and Nadya. Semechkin, the small tractor driver, and his girl were glazing the windows. Churkin was building the brick stove with the important air of an expert at the job. The caretaker, with a piece of sacking tied round his middle, was assisting him. Churkin was an exacting boss, snapping at the man all the time to keep him on his toes.

"What the devil do I want these broken bricks for? Use your brains, man, this takes more than counting beds and bedsheets."

Katya giggled. Catching sight of Dementiev coming down the street, Churkin poked his head out of the yet unglazed window, and true to habit called out:

"Let's pitch into it, fellow!" He saw Katya and added: "And girls!"

"Do you have to yell?" Dementiev said in vexation. "People are working their hardest, can't you see?"

"A little encouragement won't hurt," Churkin replied with conviction.

Tossia brought him some clay mixture in a pail and watched him for a while. She wondered how Churkin knew which brick to put where, his finicking choosiness was really amazing.

"Look, take this one," she begged him, holding out a quarter of a brick. "When are you going to use it? It's such a nice little piece!"

For reasons beyond Tossia's understanding, Churkin rejected her offer and selected a brick she never would have chosen.

"All in good time," he said with great dignity, feeling pleasantly confident of his skill and basking in the warmth of the lumberjacks' long-lost respect for him. "Make the mixture thicker, it's not cabbage soup, remember that."

Tossia turned away with a hurt look and shuffled back to her trough.

Ilya was banging away without a pause, bent, it seemed, on hammering in all the nails put out by our iron industry. Listening to the angry sounds, Tossia had a moment of sudden doubt: did he ever really tell her he loved her or did she dream it up in those long-past happy days when she knew nothing about the bet, believed everyone in the world, and turned her pillow dozens of times every single night to dream of him?

The works superintendent came panting up to Dementiev.

"How d'you do, Vadim Petrovich," he said hoarsely, shaking the engineer's hand.

"Will the house be ready by May Day now?"

"How was I to know that so many people would turn out?" the superintendent said. "We never made a success of these popular undertakings before. People are becoming more duty conscious little by little, it's the communist form of labour and all the rest of it. . . ." He broke off, and dashed to the far end of the house, shouting: "Where d'you think you're taking it? That door belongs to the other entrance! Lord, who invented these *subbotniks* anyway!"

Katya paused in her work of loading bricks into the barrow to take a look at Sasha who was clinging precariously to the very top of a telegraph pole, climbing irons on his feet, connecting the new building's electric wiring.

"Mind you don't fall!" Katya called out a warning.

This made Tossia glance up anxiously at Ilya. He was now boarding up the pediment. Honestly, couldn't he have found another job? Didn't he know or care that his ~~hammering~~ was striking straight at Tossia's heart, robbing her of her peace

of mind and forcing her to brood on her unfortunate love all the time?

Sasha waved to Katya with his mitten.

"Didn't I tell you to make the load lighter? You haven't got Nadya's strength, you know," he shouted.

"Isn't he bossy," Katya said tenderly. "We're not married yet, and he's pushing me around already!"

Tossia quickly bent down as if to pick up an enormous lump of frozen clay, and looked expectantly at Ilya. He felt her desperate stare boring through him, and stopped hammering for a moment.

"Hey, somebody down below! I'm running out of nails," he called down in a disgruntled tone, with no spark of recognition or interest in his glance, and started banging away louder than ever.

His only worry was nails! Tossia dropped the heavy lump of clay into the trough. She almost wept, it was so sad the way the best years of her life were being wasted. Some life, this! She might as well get old as quickly as possible and retire on pension. It must be nice to be a pensioner, your love would run dry by then and you'd have no more pains or worries on that score. You could live in peace and quiet, enjoying yourself.

Xan Xanich was finished with the lock. He turned the key two or three times and found it satisfactory. Next, he carried an armful of firewood he had prepared beforehand into *his* room, and taking a penknife of his own reliable making from its little cloth case, proceeded to pare a piece of wood for kindling.

"Don't be in such a hurry," Churkin said to him.

"But look how long I've been waiting! I say, do your very best, will you," Xan Xanich nodded towards the stove. "I'll make it up for you, never worry. You know what a good fire means for a family man. . . ."

Words failing him, he waved the bunch of sticks in his hand. Xan Xanich could do any job in the world, but somehow he had never learnt this all-important art of building a stove.

Churkin took a quick look at the caretaker.

"You're all set on getting this room? What if they don't give it to you?"

"Ignat Vasilyevich has promised. . . ."

"They promise it to one person and give it to another," the caretaker said with the wisdom of experience.

"D'you think they can do it?" Xan Xanich was alarmed.

"Such things happen. . . ."

Churkin scratched behind his ear with his little finger, the only clean one he had.

"They're the bosses," he explained.

Xan Xanich quickly put his knife back into its case and slipped out of the room.

Dementiev took off his coat and started clearing the front walk of building refuse.

"He's eating his heart out, poor chap," Tossia said quietly to Vera, stirring the clay mix with a stick as efficiently as if it was a pot of soup. "If I were Anfissa I'd write him a letter. A postcard, at least."

A bright little sunbeam, reflected from the windowpane Sasha was carrying to the house, skipped across the dirty, much trampled snow and the first puddles of the year. Sasha was in such a hurry that he forgot to take off his climbing irons, and they clinked like spurs.

Ilya's hammering suddenly ceased. No one except Tossia had paid much attention to his banging while it was going on, but now that it had broken off so abruptly, everyone looked up at once to see what was wrong. Tossia thought it a shame to miss this chance of getting another look at him, and eagerly craned her neck together with the rest.

"Where are those nails!" Ilya shouted from above.

"Who does he think he is, yelling like that," Tossia grumbled. For all her love she wasn't blind to his faults, and had no intention of tolerating his overweening manner.

Sasha stopped and looked about him for someone to carry the nails up to Ilya. The reflection danced on Tossia's indignant face.

"I say, Vera, take that box of nails up to Ilya," he said. "Help her, Tossia."

"Can't he come down and fetch it himself? He's got hands, hasn't he?" Tossia said peevishly, shielding her eyes with a hand from the tiresome sunbeam.

Vera had already got hold of one end of the box, raised it off the ground, and stood waiting for Tossia to do her part. Reluctantly, she picked up the other end.

They carried the box up the rickety planks to the attic. Vera started back at once and Tossia hurried after her, but suddenly she was tugged back. Her heart missed a beat. She thought it was Ilya but actually it was the belt of her jacket caught on something.

"Let go," she said softly. "Of all the silly. . . ."

She took a step forward, but the belt would not let her go.

"Let go, I tell you!" she hissed without turning round.

She pulled again, but could not break the hold.

"Let go, you beast!" she cried in exasperation, picked up a slab and swerved to bash the beast's head in.

Ilya was standing with his back to her, engrossed in fitting the planks to the crossbeams. Disappointed, Tossia dropped the slab and slowly unhooked her belt. She started going down, but at that very moment Ilya, having fitted the plank in place at long last, stretched out a hand, without looking at her, and flexed his fingers insistently.

She misunderstood the gesture and shied away, but then it dawned on her that he was simply asking for a nail. She handed him one out of the box. She did it for the common good, to speed up the completion of the house where Nadya and Xan Xanich were promised a room. Ilya hammered in the nail, and held out his hand again. Tossia handed one to him again, took up a more convenient position, and held the next nail in readiness: she was no dunderhead, efficiency was second nature to her.

And once again, Ilya's measured banging rang out over the building site.

His back turned to Tossia, Ilya worked like an automaton: he hammered the nail in with one clean blow, stretched out his

hand for another, and struck again. He did not seem to know or care who handed him the nails. Tossia frowned and pouted sulkily.

Ilya held out his hand for the next nail, and finding none coming, moved his fingers impatiently.

"Come on, don't take all day!"

"You did not hire me. Here, take the lot!" Tossia picked up the box, staggering from the weight, and threw it at Ilya's feet.

It landed on the toe of his boot. He gasped, and began to hop on one foot, grimacing with pain.

A strange irresistible force picked Tossia off her feet and sent her flying to him.

"Oh, Ilyushka, does it hurt?" she asked remorsefully, gazing up into his face, more distressed than he was.

Ilya tried to smile, but pain contorted his face.

"Never mind. . . . It's bearable. . . ."

* * *

A beaming Xan Xanich came running from the office, splashing through the puddles.

"It's ours, Nadya," he shouted, waving a slip of paper. "The very one, facing south!"

A noisy crowd surrounded them.

"You'll have to stand us a drink, Xan Xanich!"

"We're all coming to your house-warming!"

"My dear boys, there'll be everything, just let Nadya and me move in," Xan Xanich, whose excitement made him look sort of tousled, promised feelingly. "You'll all come to our wedding and our house-warming!"

"Kiss the bride!" Fil called out cheekily.

"That's not funny," Xan Xanich said, taking offence.

Suddenly, everyone looked up. The hammering now had a jubilant, festive ring, resounding all over the town. The forest echo far away caught it up and repeated it like a well-trained dog: whoof, whoof, whoof!

Vera smiled understandingly. Fil and Longlegs exchanged alarmed looks, and hurried up to Ilya with more planks.

Churkin fixed the range into the brickwork.

"Finished!" he announced.

The caretaker proudly examined the first stove he had helped to make in his life.

"Will it be good?"

"Who knows," Churkin replied, playing safe.

Xan Xanich proudly led Nadya into the room. With an air of condescension he showed the caretaker the narrow slip of paper which, amazingly, was the key to all the joys of his forthcoming married life.

"Well, well," the caretaker commented.

Churkin scratched behind his ear with his little finger, and then spread out his hands.

"They're the bosses," he said.

Churkin and the caretaker washed their hands and went away. At the door, Churkin turned round and gave Xan Xanich an eloquent wink, reminding him of his promise to make it up for him for the stove.

"The waiting's over at last, Nadya dear," said Xan Xanich.

Suddenly the room seemed to him smaller than it had that night three weeks ago when he and Nadya stole in to see it and argued where to put the table. With a worried frown he measured the room all over again and found that all the fourteen square metres he had wrenched from fate were there safe and sound, patiently waiting for him and Nadya to come and claim them.

Xan Xanich hastened to light the stove, and Nadya began to scrub the floor. A smell of steaming mud rose in the room. The stove began to dry up in spots, and at first smoked terribly.

"Never mind," Xan Xanich said cheerfully. "Smoke from your own hearth can't hurt the eyes!"

He examined his domain with minute thoroughness, tugged at the door handle, and tried all the window latches.

"We'll replace all these, never worry, Nadya dear," he said.

Nadya looked at him in surprise: his voice sounded so different. There was something new and unfamiliar about him. He seemed to have grown a whole head taller, and his manner

had become self-confident, conceited even. Possession of this longed-for home of his own was truly working miracles with Xan Xanich, and bringing to the surface all that he had prudently kept under control until then. It appeared she did not know him so very well after all.

He pressed his ear to the chimney and invited Nadya to come and listen too.

Nadya came to stand beside him, and, touching shoulders, they listened to the warm air humming in the chimney.

"A good, steady hum," he said approvingly with a smile of sheer bliss. "It knows what it's doing, that stove.... The one at the hostel is no match for this one. All it has to do there is provide heat, but here it's got to give warmth as well. It may be a dumb object, but it certainly knows what a happy home needs."

Nadya nodded in agreement and turned to her floor scrubbing again.

It was growing dark. Sasha knocked the butts of two axes together again and again, announcing it was time to call it a day. After everyone had gone and the noise and bustle had died down, Ilya and Tossia came walking slowly past the already misted window of Xan Xanich's room.

Tossia walked a little ahead and Ilya kept deferentially behind.

"Tossia," he called hesitantly, still not quite sure that his troubles were completely over.

"Don't talk, or we'll start fighting again," Tossia said gently.

Ilya obeyed and said no more. They walked side by side, glancing at each other quickly and stealthily every now and again. As usual, Tossia soon took the lead. Ilya mustered up the courage to hold her back by the arm. She begged his pardon with a look, and slowed her pace. Now they matched their steps and sauntered along without speaking....

... The stove no longer smoked. Xan Xanich brought a block of wood from outside, and sat down on it in the middle of the room.

"Come and sit down for a while," he said to Nadya. "The floor can wait."

"I'll finish it first," she replied.

She found it strangely embarrassing to be there alone with Xan Xanich, as though a barrier of unspoken words had suddenly risen between them.

"Ignat Vasilyevich agreed at once to let us have this particular room," he said. "He thinks very highly of you, Nadya dear."

"And of you too," Nadya's voice came from a dark corner. She sounded anxious to repay him for all his kindness towards her, trifling offering though this was.

"But he thinks more of you," Xan Xanich said, being a stickler for the truth. "And wasn't it splendid of the young people to get together and finish the house ahead of schedule! Luck was against us for so long, but now at last the wind is blowing our way. . . ."

There was a knock on the door.

"Come right in, the door's open," Xan Xanich called out in the tone of a genial host.

The door opened to admit Semechkin, the tractor driver, and his wife-to-be, a shy, soft-spoken girl.

"So you're to have this room?" Semechkin asked, looking about the future home of Xan Xanich and Nadya.

"That's right," Xan Xanich replied happily, slapping the quickly drying side of his stove.

"And we're next door," Semechkin said.

"We'll be neighbours then. Welcome to our home!" Xan Xanich solemnly shook the small tractor driver's hand.

Nadya had finished scrubbing the floor, and now she was carefully wiping it with a clean cloth. It looked as if there was nothing in the world she dreaded more than being left with nothing to do.

"Nadya dear, leave off for a moment," Xan Xanich said, his mood suddenly changing to one of nervous apprehension. "We've got to move in tonight, it will be safer that way. You never know what may happen: supposing they change their mind at the office, or someone forces the lock and simply moves in. Try and throw him out afterwards. . . ."

He filled the burnt-out stove with the firewood he had brought, locked the door and put the key away in his innermost pocket

"I'll go and fetch the camp bed, and you hurry and pack your things. Don't carry them here, I'll come and get them. . . . We'll rough it here tonight, and go to the registry office first thing tomorrow morning."

Looking and feeling years younger, Xan Xanich rushed away into the blue spring twilight. Responding to his excitement, Nadya also started down the deserted street at a brisk pace. But the nearer she got to the hostel, the more hesitant and dragging became her steps, as if a strong wind blowing into her face made walking difficult.

To make a short cut, Nadya crossed the waste plot of ground behind Kamchatka. The voices coming from there startled her, and she quickly slipped out of sight behind a woodpile.

"I missed seeing the Northern Lights, you know," Tossia said regretfully.

"Never mind, you'll see them next winter," Ilya reassured her.

The wind swung the street lamp on the corner, and the wavering spot of light ran over the dirty spring snow, searching for something among the sagging snowdrifts. Now the nosey circle of light clambered up the blank wall of the hostel, slipped across the old, time-blackened logs, and with the ruthlessness of a spotlight showed up Ilya and Tossia sitting close together on the fateful earthen bank. Dazzled, Tossia screwed her face up and really looked quite ugly, too plain to be anyone's love, Nadya thought. And yet Ilya was sitting so docilely beside her, and gazing with such rapt admiration at her screwed-up face, as if she were a raving beauty!

The spot of light backed away, and darkness hid the happy couple from Nadya's eyes.

Winter relinquished its last positions to spring that day. The evening frost tried to challenge the warm south-west wind, but it lost the battle and retreated. The last remaining icicles were falling from the eaves. April worked day and night eating away the snowdrifts, and if you listened hard you could actually hear

the snow sagging with a tiny rustle and the groaning of an old, old man. The dripping snow had not learnt to tinkle yet. The drops shot like bullets into the spongy snow, and scurried about like quick little mice, trying but failing to find each other.

Tossia caught a dripping icicle as it fell, bit off the end and offered it to Ilya.

"Take a bite, it's sweet!"

Obediently, Ilya crunched the flat-tasting ice.

"Look at us sitting here like real grownups!" Tossia said, laughing.

This was such sheer happiness, it was so strange and amazing, that she wanted to tone it down a little so it should not blind her.

"But we are grownups," Ilya said somewhat resentfully. "If you like, we can go and get married tomorrow and nobody can stop us."

"What a family we'd make: you the husband, and me the wife! Too funny for words!"

"You're just a silly child still," Ilya said tenderly.

"Where did you all get this silly child stuff? Mummy Vera does it, and you do too! Go and get yourself a clever girl, why don't you?"

"I didn't mean it like that. A fellow's got to watch his words with you all the time. Gosh, you *are* difficult!"

"Go and get yourself someone easy then!"

"But I want you and nobody else."

"Then like it or lump it!"

Ilya tried to put his arm round her, but she ducked and moved away.

"Keep your hands to yourself! The idea!"

"But Tossia!"

"Behave yourself and admire my beautiful face," she said and giggled. She had him where she wanted him now!

Ilya tried to kiss her again.

"You're a real aggressor, Ilyushka," Tossia said, breaking free.

"May I at least do this?" Ilya asked hopefully, tentatively placing his hand on Tossia's shoulder.

She thought it over.

"You may," she gave him her kind permission.

With bated breath Nadya listened to their excited whispering.

The drops began to tinkle in the nearest, water-filled snowdrift. At first, each drop tinkled its own bell, unaware that it would do better if it merged with the drop tinkling beside it. But then a trickle of water rang out clearly and melodiously in the thick of the snowdrift, and immediately another trickle responded to it nearby. They listened to each other for a while, fell silent, and then from underneath the load of snow the first brook began to babble in its sweet and timid baby voice. The sagging snowdrift squashed the sound, but the next minute the brook began to prattle again, a bit louder now. And again it fell silent.

It seemed that this newly born water just could not remember, no matter how hard it tried, exactly how it had behaved in its former liquid states before it turned to snow—when it fell in a downpour from the rain clouds, bubbled in the springs, stumbled over the stones in the shoals, lazily flowed in the steppeland rivers, churned in the turbines of power stations, dreamily lapped the shores of lakes, quenched the thirst of parched land as it hurried along the irrigation canals, roared in sea storms, whirled skyward in a typhoon, or pounded a coral reef with a great, heaving surf. . . .

"And you call this love!" Ilya grumbled. "All the blokes are saying all sorts of things about us already, and I've never even kissed you yet. I'll never live this down if they find out."

"A fat lot I care for your blokes!"

"And for me?"

"So you're at it again?" Tossia said, shaking her head. "Oh, you men! Can't you do without this necking business? You mean you just can't? Go on, tell me."

"Aren't you a funny one, though!" Ilya was honestly amazed. "Why should we do without it?"

Tossia didn't have a ready answer for that one.

"You mean, since everyone else necks, let's all sort of join in. Is that what you mean?"

"Why, sure," Ilya cried eagerly. "How else? Honestly, I don't quite get you. . . ."

"Let's be different . . . let's not," Tossia suggested, without really knowing what she wanted.

"Lovely idea!" Ilya muttered resentfully.

"I'm scared, you know," Tossia admitted trustingly. "We used to be strangers, and now, just like that. . . ."

Without a word, Ilya removed his hand from her shoulder and sat further away from her.

"Sore at me? Honestly, you are a character! Oh, all right then."

Tossia turned sideways to him, shut her eyes tight and poked her finger into her cheek, showing him just where to kiss her. He gently touched the spot with his lips. She still kept her eyes shut. Was she digesting her first kiss, or was she asking for more? He hugged her tight, kissed her hard on the mouth, and let her go at once, prepared to meet the storm.

But she laughed! He was prepared for anything but this laughter, an insult to his male vanity.

"What's so funny?" he asked glumly.

"It's a secret. I'll never tell you. Don't ask me to."

Ilya moved up closer.

"Come on, Tossia, tell!"

"I'm ashamed to talk about such things."

"But it's only me you'll be telling it to!"

"You know . . . I always wondered how people kissed, didn't their noses get in the way? But now I know: they don't get in the way at all!"

"What kindergarten stuff!" Ilya gasped.

It was quite amusing that for all her cockiness she was really such an innocent, and it flattered the male in him that he was the first man to kiss her. Her childish admission gave his conscience a twinge, though. He suddenly envied Tossia that she was only just beginning to live her grown-up life,

while he had already done more than enough gadding about in his. He saw nothing but the filthy side of his great many experiences with women of which he had always been so proud.

It was just too bad that you couldn't change your past in any way. Ilya felt acutely sorry that he could never erase from his past either Anfissa, or any of the other girls he had made casual love to, who neither mattered nor meant anything to him now that he came to think of it. Everything would have been quite different with him and Tossia had he met her two years ago when he was just back from the army and the local girls had not started throwing themselves at him yet.

But he was incapable of brooding long over anything sad, and more especially over something that could not be remedied.

"Come here, I bet you're frozen," he said.

He unbuttoned his coat, wrapped Tossia in and kissed her again so she'd hurry up and get used to him.

"Our noses don't get in the way, do they?"

"They don't. . . . Just see you don't get a swelled head. Because when men get what they want from a girl they start swaggering. And it hurts us, see?"

"I'll never hurt you again," Ilya promised solemnly.

He wanted to say something beautiful and serious to her, something that would reassure her for ever after, but as usual the right words would not come. So to give some sort of expression to these great, unspoken words, Ilya kissed her tenderly on the corner of her mouth.

As God was his witness, he never meant to offend her with this brotherly kiss, but suddenly she burst into tears.

"What's wrong now?" Ilya asked in alarm.

"I thought of my dad," Tossia sobbed out. "I always think of him when I'm happy. Why didn't he live to be happy with me? All he knew was that Mummy was going to have a baby, but he was killed before he could know if it was a boy or a girl. . . . He didn't even know I was born, he got killed!"

Ilya held her in a strong, tender embrace, instinctively trying

to protect her from all the evils lurking in this world that has existed for so long but still did not get itself run properly. With his whole being he suddenly understood that he was no longer alone, and for the first time in his life he experienced the thrill of being responsible for somebody else. He would now have to answer for everything that happened to Tossia today, tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, and ten years hence. He did not venture to look farther ahead than that. . . . He hoped with all his heart that she would never regret placing her life in his hands. To start with, as a first step in this new life of his, Ilya loosened his hold in case he was hurting her and she was too proud to say so.

Tossia put her head on his shoulder trustingly, fidgeted a little before settling down comfortably, and then remained still for a long time. Ilya's arm went to sleep, but he stood it stoically lest by stirring he should disturb Tossia's peace. If anything, he was sorry that this first test he was put to was so easy. He'd have gladly endured far greater discomfort for Tossia's sake.

The young water remembered its former mode of life at last, and rippled louder and louder under the mass of snow, growing stronger with every hour, working indefatigably for the victory of spring which was launching a general attack on a wide front.

Nadya quietly walked away, careful not to startle the lovers.

Nothing like that had ever happened to her. No one had ever wanted to kiss her so badly, no one in the whole wide world, and she had never been needed by anyone as badly as Tossia was needed by Ilya. The happiness that was her woman's due must have lost its way coming to her, and now that she was going to marry Xan Xanich, so good and kind but unbeloved, it would never find its way to her. . . .

She walked into the hostel wearing a gloomy and grimly calm expression, and immediately started to pack her things.

"Aren't you and Xan Xanich lucky!" the girl with the earrings said enviously.

She had moved in after Anfissa left, and now sat on Anfissa's old bed, putting her hair in rollers for the night.

"Sasha and I are going to fight for a room too," Katya announced, looking up from her embroidery. "We're hoping to get it in the autumn."

Vera came hurrying in. Her eyes sought something on her bed and bedside table. Without bothering to take off her coat, she rushed to her bed, looked under the pillow but found nothing there either.

"Does anyone know if the postman's been today?" she asked quickly.

Katya looked at Vera with mischievous curiosity, but bit back her sarcastic remark, taking pity on the older girl, who was obviously embarrassed by just her glance.

Nadya, carrying her best dress from the wardrobe,—the wedding dress she had bought long ago, suddenly stopped short in the middle of the room, and stood there with a far-away look.

"Nadya, what's wrong?" Vera asked anxiously.

Nadya walked to her open suitcase, hesitated for a minute, and sat down on the bed, holding the dress in her outstretched arms.

"Don't do anything foolish, Nadya," Vera said, evidently guessing what was on Nadya's mind.

Xan Xanich came rushing in with a gleaming frying pan he had just bought. He was still terribly excited, and forgot to knock on the door for the first time in all those months he had been coming to see Nadya every night.

"Aren't you ready, Nadya dear?" he cried cheerfully, waving the frying pan. "Look, it's aluminium, it'll come in useful, don't you think?"

He squeezed her arm above the elbow and whispered: "The camp bed's there already." Next, he picked up Nadya's suitcase and placed it on a chair for greater convenience. Submitting to the force of his enthusiasm in spite of herself, Nadya folded her wedding dress and they began to pack her things. The movements of her strong arms were gradually growing slower as if the air about them was turning thick and sticky. Xan Xanich watched her from the corner of his eye. He saw the change in her, and it worried and even frightened him.

Their hands touched as they worked, but they did not look into each other's eyes. Her strange mood affected him. He was busily wrapping the new frying pan in the towel with the faded cock, when suddenly his fingers stopped dead and froze to the family aluminium. Nadya looked at him in alarm, and for a brief second their glances met. Xan Xanich quickly looked away, and made a bigger fuss than before over wrapping the precious pan. Nadya suddenly saw that what they were involved in was deception and not of themselves alone, but of the people about them as well. They were about to do something bad and shameful; they were going to violate a human law the whole world observed.

Nadya straightened up. Her face was haggard and unlovely.

"I say, girls . . . Vera, Katya, and you, what's your name." She turned to the girl with the ear-rings. "Go outside for a minute, will you. I've got to talk to Xan Xanich about something."

"We shan't be more than a minute," Xan Xanich chimed in apologetically. "No more than a minute."

"What a life!" Katya complained, going to the door. "We live out in the corridor more than we do in the room."

The girl with the ear-rings, looking pretty sour, followed Katya out. The metal rollers in her hair had a bellicose glint, she obviously hated going out into the cold corridor, but having only moved in the day before and not feeling quite at home yet, she was afraid to start a row.

"Think everything over so you won't be sorry afterwards," Vera said, looking into Nadya's eyes. "Think hard, Nadya."

Nadya nodded her thanks. And now she was alone with Xan Xanich.

"We have discussed everything, Xan Xanich," Nadya said in a low but very firm voice. "Where to put the table, where to put the wardrobe, but somehow we never got round to love. . . ."

"Too true," Xan Xanich said contritely, taking the blame at once. "The time seemed never right for it. . . . It's a good thing you reminded me of it, people always talk about love before they marry, it's a sort of custom. . . . Well, how d'you feel about love, Nadya dear?"

Nadya was caught unawares by the turn this difficult conversation had taken, and looked lost and scared.

"I have great respect for you, Xan Xanich. You're a good, kind man and . . . and there's no job in the world you can't do. . . ."

She broke off and fell silent.

"In other words, you don't love me," Xan Xanich said, and his hands, of their own accord, began to remove Nadya's towel from his frying pan.

Nadya watched his busy hands in fright.

"Wait a minute! I'm used to you, and I've no one else in the world. . . ."

"Nadya dear, don't," Xan Xanich's tone was quite unruffled, as if none of this concerned him, and Nadya alone needed comforting. This unexpected turn of events did not come as too much of a surprise to him, it seemed; he might have been expecting it all the time, and in his heart of hearts had not been at all secure in his happiness. "Have you fallen in love with someone, Nadya dear?"

"Oh no, I haven't fallen in love with anyone, but then with you too I'm not. . . . I like you, I'm used to you, but there it is," Nadya spread her hands out in a gesture of defeat.

"Well, you can't dictate to your heart. . . . I'm not angry with you, it's all my fault entirely, the old fool! Of all the stupid ideas!"

He draped Nadya's towel with the embroidered cock on the headboard of her bed very carefully, and even smoothed out a crease. Nadya watched his every movement, spellbound.

"But what about you, Xan Xanich?" she asked with timid hope. "How do you feel? Do you love me? At least a little?"

"Who, me?" Xan Xanich said.

"Yes, you."

"Why, of course," Xan Xanich said briskly, but meeting Nadya's eyes, he ended lamely with "How shall I put it. . . ."

He hunched his shoulders and pulled in his head as if to say: "How should I know?"

"I thought you did, at least," Nadya said hopelessly. "How can we live together then? Other people marry for love, and we? Just so as not to be alone?"

"Don't take it so, Nadya dear. . . . There are marriages without love too, but of course it's better if there is love, there's no arguing that. The way I see it, love is something like cement in marriage, makes it stronger. But I won't ever leave you, love or no love, you need have no doubts on that score. Then there's the room. . . . Maybe we should give it a try, eh? Others manage, after all. . . ." Xan Xanich glanced at the door. "It's not too late, Nadya dear, it's up to you to decide. But don't take too long, the girls must be feeling pretty cold out there. . . ."

His consideration for others, even at a moment like this, moved Nadya to tears. How good he was!

"Maybe you'd better do the deciding," she made an attempt to hand down the responsibility for their future lives to him.

"No, it's you who must decide," he said with unwonted firmness. "In marriage, the woman is the boss. . . . Well, Nadya dear?"

She turned away to the dark, blank window. Silence flooded the room. The "cuckoo" engine gave a short cry down at the lower depot. And silence again. Complete but for the clock fixed by Xan Xanich, ticking away loudly and cheerfully on the wall.

"Well, I'll be going," Xan Xanich said wearily, and gave his old friend, the faded cock on Nadya's towel, a flip on the comb.

He dragged his feet across the room, holding the frying pan in front of him in an outstretched hand. He seemed to have grown very old in those minutes, and even shrunk in size.

"Xan Xanich, forgive me for disgracing you before people," Nadya said in a low voice. "I didn't mean this to happen. . . ."

"It's all right, Nadya dear, I'll get over it somehow," he replied, without turning round.

At the door he stopped and, parting with his dream of family and home, took a last look at the room where he used to sit with Nadya, eat fried potatoes for supper, stop up the gaps be-

tween the logs, worry with the rest about Tossia and Ilya, and plan what furniture he and Nadya would need for their promised room, which he got after all but which did not bring him the happiness he had waited for so long.

"It isn't slow?" he asked, glancing at the clock on the wall. "Keep the stool, Nadya dear. . . . To remember me by. . . . I'll make myself another one if I need it."

He motioned with a stiff arm to the stool with the crescent-shaped slit, and, suddenly noticing the pan he was holding, quickly put it on the edge of the stove.

"I wonder who'll get our room now?" he thought aloud, and left the room, closing the door softly.

* * *

Fil's much depleted gang came strolling down the quiet street of the slumbering town. Longlegs broke off an icicle and threw it into Churkin's partly open bedroom window. Freezer did his bit too: he picked up the sledge, left by one of the kids on the porch, and dropped it into the well. Fil made a wry face, and thought dejectedly: "Can't think of anything really exciting to do!"

Gavrilovna came out of the canteen, clutching something wrapped in her apron under her arm.

"Shall we give her a scare?" Freezer suggested.

Longlegs and Freezer stole up behind the elderly dish-washer, and yelled in her ear. Gavrilovna dropped the thing she was carrying, leapt down from the wooden pavement, and started off at a run, splashing through the puddles. The gang catcalled.

Fil sighed noisily. His gang was certainly running to seed, stooping to such small-time tricks!

They came to Kamchatka and saw a couple sitting in the shadow.

"Give them a scare?" Freezer suggested again.

Longlegs made a dash but, recognising Ilya, hastened to beat a retreat.

"Better not," he said, remembering his past experience.

Fil, too, made out Tossia and Ilya now.

"Forward march!" he ordered his gang, pointing down the street, and with a deliberate stride walked up to the couple sitting on the earthen bank.

"You two sitting here?" he asked rhetorically, peering into their happy and lost to the world faces.

Ilya reluctantly removed his arm from round Tossia.

"Yes, we are," Tossia replied bravely.

"And how d'you like it? Not bored?" Fil asked in the keenly interested tone of an explorer confronted with a new and strange phenomenon.

"Not very. It's bearable," Ilya answered him.

"So you did bring her to Kamchatka after all, did you?"

Tossia moved away from Ilya and waited to hear what he would say.

"No, it's she who brought me," Ilya admitted.

Tossia inclined her head, confirming that this was really so, and shifted closer to Ilya again.

"I'm honestly sorry for you," Fil said condescendingly. "Imagine wasting the best years of your life on this! I say, have you got a cigarette on you?"

Ilya handed him his pack of cigarettes and slapped his pockets in search of matches.

"I've got a light," Fil said haughtily and clicked his lighter.

In the small flickering light he stared with proper respect at the girl who had come between him and Ilya. It beat him. How did this plain, unattractive girl manage to make a lap dog out of a dashing fellow like Ilya? For all his bluster, Fil always felt very small when he came across something in life that he did not understand. It made him feel a fool, and Fil did not like the feeling because he believed he was as good as anyone else, even if they understood everything. He'd rather have the notoriety of a hoodlum than be dismissed for a fool.

He gave up the effort to get to the root of the secret of Tos-

sia's success, snapped off the light, and let the lovers enjoy the dark again.

"Oh well, forward march," he muttered, more clearly aware than ever before that certain things in life were definitely beyond his understanding. Reluctantly, he walked away.

In the meantime his gang had trickled away. Only his two faithfuls remained—Longlegs and Freezer. They were making snowballs with the remaining dirty snow and aiming them at the street lamp.

"The best of the best are getting spliced, and look at you two!" Fil said accusingly to his pals.

A stray dog came running down the street, one of those mongrels forever snooping around garbage bins. To let off steam, Fil stamped his feet and yelled at it. The dog scampered away with its tail between its legs. Fil cleared his throat in some embarrassment and darted a look at his henchmen.

Longlegs was no longer there, and Freezer—a sorry sight in his gorgeous deerskin cap—was still throwing snowballs at the street lamp.

"What a shot!" Fil said in disgust.

He packed the wet snow into a hard ball, took careful aim, anxious not to fall in the eyes of his last and truest henchman, and hurled it at the lamp. There was a ping, the street became dark at once, and bits of broken glass fell on the ground.

"Keep it up!" Fil told Freezer with some pride, bucked by his first piece of luck that day.

The lanky figure of the caretaker hurrying towards them appeared for a moment in the light of the street lamp down the block. Freezer, always the coward, never bothering to warn Fil of the approaching danger, slunk away into the darkness of a side street.

The keen-eyed caretaker overtook the fugitive, pounced on him and pulled the deerskin cap off his head. Freezer ducked, and dashed away as fast as his legs would carry him.

"No cap until you've paid the damage!" the caretaker shouted at the scurrying figure.

Fil was too proud to run away. He remained where he was, with the bits of broken glass around him, patiently waiting for the furious caretaker to attack him. He was in the mood for a good noisy row, even a fight he'd welcome. He'd take a black eye if that would deaden the unpleasant gnawing sensation he was experiencing: it was as if a worm was eating at his heart.

Coming level with the broken street lamp, the caretaker opened his mouth to speak, but a look at Fil all ready for battle made him change his mind. He saluted without a word, and walked on. The man's attitude puzzled Fil: was he reluctant to punish two people for one crime, or was he simply scared of him?

"That's our bosses for you!" Fil said in bitter disappointment, and spat savagely on the ground.

... The caretaker, who was making his rounds before turning in, came to Kamchatka where Tossia and Ilya were still sitting.

"You haven't a hope," he told them gruffly. "No rooms will be available for a long time."

"Leave us alone, will you," Ilya snapped at him, and whispered to Tossia: "Tomorrow the whole town'll know we've been to Kamchatka."

"Let them!" Tossia said cheerfully.

"Look at the brave girl!" Ilya said, marvelling at her courage. "Now you kiss me, you haven't once. . . . It's not fair."

"Oh no, Ilyushka, I'm scared," Tossia said in a small voice. "Another time, all right? I'm sorry but I've got to go home, my knees are frozen stiff."

They left Kamchatka and walked round to the front door.

Tossia stealthily pushed open the door a little, in case she had to make a hurried escape, and looked up into the sky.

There was a new moon, younger brother of the one Tossia had wished a rocket would pass by for her alone to see one night last autumn. "There is justice in the world, after all," she decided, recalling all her old hurts and troubles.

"Look, there's a sputnik!" she cried.

"There's not supposed to be one tonight," Ilya said, looking up. "Sasha hasn't said anything. . . . Where d'you see it?"

"There!" Tossia stood on tiptoe, kissed him on the cheek, and slipped into the house, slamming the door behind her.

"Hey-hey!" Ilya yelled, shattering the silence of the night, his feelings too big for him to contain, and started down the street through the wet squelching snow.

The echo picked up his shout and carried it away over the sleeping town, over the forest, and over the hushed world beneath that slender crescent moon.

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